

BANDWAGON

MAY-JUNE 2011



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The Journal Of The Circus Historical Society

Vol. 55 No. 3

MAY-JUNE 2011

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EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

Bandwagon, The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, Inc. (USPS 406-390) (ISSN 0005-4968) is published bi-monthly by the Circus Historical Society, Inc., 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43212. Periodical Postage paid at Columbus, OH. Postmaster. Send address changes to *Bandwagon*, 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43212.

Editorial, advertising and circulation office is located at 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43212, Phone (614) 294-5361. Advertising rates are: Full page \$100, half page \$60, quarter page \$35.

Bandwagon new membership and subscription rate is \$40.00 per year in the United States, \$48.00 per year in Canada and outside the United States. Single copies \$7.50 plus \$3.50 postage. Please direct all concerns regarding address changes and lack of delivery to the editor. Membership applications can be found on the CHS web site www.circushistory.org.

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OUR COVER

Ray Marsh Brydon was one of the most colorful showmen of the twentieth century. Born in 1899, he took out his first freak show in 1920 after spending his apprenticeship on the Sells-Floto Circus. Throughout the 1920s his sideshow or pit show appeared on many field shows. He did very well promoting the midget twins, Ike and Mike.

From 1931 to 1935 Brydon had his sideshow on the Original Gentry Bros. Famous Shows and Bays Bros. Circus. After the Bays show died in early July 1935, it was reorganized and went out in mid-August as Rice Bros. Circus. Brydon ran the sideshow and was listed as "general superintendent" in a *Billboard* story, an indication that he may have had money invested in the company.

From 1936 to 1938 he appears to have been the sole owner of Rice Bros. and

its successors. In mid-1936 he modified the title to the Original Dan Rice Circus. The next year his circus started out as Dan Rice, but finished as Bray Bros. In 1938, he changed the title to the Great Harris Bros. World Toured Shows.

Brydon's luck ran out in August 1938 when the circus was foreclosed upon, and most if not all the trucks were repossessed. He took what was left of Harris Bros. to the Bantley All American Shows carnival where he placed his sideshow. During the early 1940s he toured a store show in the winter and had his ten-in-one on carnivals or at amusement parks in the summer.

He 1945 he leased equipment from Paul Lewis for a small circus he called Dan Rice. He continued on carnivals until his death in 1954. His last circus was a small trick on the Gem City Carnival in the early 1950s. It was, of course, called Dan Rice.

The one sheet lithograph on our cover dates from 1936 or 1937. Produced by the Riverside Printing Company, it was one of many ancient designs sold by the company over a twenty or thirty year period. As Fred D. Pfening, Jr. wryly observed: "Brydon had purchased a large amount of old stock paper from the Riverside Printing Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This paper was available at near scrap prices, as the illustrations featured performers in costumes used at the turn of the century. These lithographs were so old it was a wonder they would go through the press again to add the show title."

Many small-time showmen besides Brydon used Riverside lithographs in the 1930s. For that reason, its posters are relatively common today. Because its images looked old-fashioned even in the 1930s, unknowledgeable paper dealers today inevitably misdate the bills by twenty or thirty years. Original in Pfening Archives.

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THE CIRCUS INVESTMENTS OF JOHN PLUTO

by John Polacsek



A young John Pluto. John Polacsek collection.

John Pluto (1895–1971) of Baltimore generally went by the name John Pluto when he dabbled in the business of buying and selling circuses and circus equipment. Documenting his early circus career is difficult. He's not included in census records, and few references to his early years exist. But fortunately, portions of his business life are well recorded in two caches of his papers, one held by the author and the other at the Circus World Museum library.

At some point between 1906 and 1909, Pluto worked as a candy butcher on Martin Downs's Cole Bros Circus,¹ and in 1917 was a ticket seller for the "Juanita, that Girl from Mexico" sideshow attraction on the J. H. Eschman Circus.²

In 1920, Pluto started the Globe Sales Company, a wholesale business that sold punchboards. These compact gambling devices consisted of flat sheets of wood or cardboard drilled with dozens, if not hundreds, of holes. Each hole contained a slip of paper with an amount of money written on it. For a small fee a player used a metal stylus to punch out the slip, and would win whatever amount was on it. Needless to say, the total payoff on any board was considerably less than the payoff from punching all the holes. These punchboards were very popular, and Pluto made a pile of money. He also owned another enterprise, the Fraternal Distributing Company. Throughout he maintained his love for the circus and, in 1924, used his cash to buy into and manage the Golden Bros. Trained Animal Show.

1924 Golden Bros. Circus

Golden Bros. Circus was incorporated in California in 1922 as Howe's Great London Shows and Van Amburg's Trained Wild Animals, Inc. and owned by Michael E. Golden, Charles J. Adams, and Milton B. Runkle. Winter quarters was near Palo Alto. In July 1923, their attorney, A. W. Brouillet, alerted the owners of the need to re-title the show in order to ease friction with the former owners. The application was to be signed by the principals, Charles Adams, Mike Golden, and Marguerite Golden, Mike's wife.

Perhaps more importantly, the new title, Golden Bros. Trained Animal Shows Co. Inc., allowed Brouillet to argue to the tax collector that this was not a "circus." "A Circus is one thing and a Trained Animal Show is another, and they should not try to tax us for One Hundred Dollar Tax on the theory that we are conducting a circus. . . we have only paid the special tax in every state that we have been in. In Indiana was the only place that the Internal Revenue tried to tax us for a Circus Tax. But after the In-

ternal Revenue officers had seen our show they came out and told us that we were perfectly right and that the special tax that we were paying \$7.50 for each show was correct. . . with special attention being paid to the training and breeding and domesticating of wild animals and training and breeding domesticated animals for show and educational purposes."³

In the end, Brouillet was able to persuade the state to tax the "show" property at \$10 for each semiannual period.⁴

Pluto was the punchboard king of Baltimore. Once a popular gambling device in bars, fraternal organizations, and elsewhere, punchboards were the ancestors of today's instant lottery tickets. While this punchboard probably dates from the 1940s, probably has no connection to Pluto, and the player peels off a sticker rather than punch a hole, this board gives an idea how they worked. Pfening Archives.



The Golden Bros. Trained Wild Animals Show opened the 1924 season at Anaheim, California, on March 8. The performance began with the spec; #2 a pony drill in rings one and two; #3 a troupe of hind-foot ponies on the track; #4 a steel cage of black bears and a drinking bear and clowns in ring two; #5 clowns on track; #6 bucking mule and clowns in rings one and two; #7 dancing dogs in ring one, Iona Carl dancing in steel arena among a group of lions, and dancing dogs in ring two; #8 clown number; #9 riding goat act, riding hybrids in the steel arena, riding collies in ring two; #10 riding dogs and monkeys in ring one, steel arena mixed group, riding dogs and monkeys in ring two; #11 high-diving dogs at both ends of the track; #12 Virginia DeLancey with white horse and pigeons; #13 clown number; #14 ring one performing camel, ring two performing elephant; #15 posing horses in rings and on track; #16 wrestling bears in ring one and steel cage and ring two; Wild West announcement; #17 dog act in ring one, group of female lions in steel arena, dog act in ring two; #18 clown number; #19 twelve-horse manège number; #20 goat act in ring one, riding lions in steel arena, riding geese act in ring two; #21 clown number; #22 trained pigs in ring one, group of leopards, lions, and panthers in steel arena, trained pigs in ring two; #23 fox hunt and hurdle jumping horses on track; #24 clown number; #25 untamable lion act with six African lions.⁵

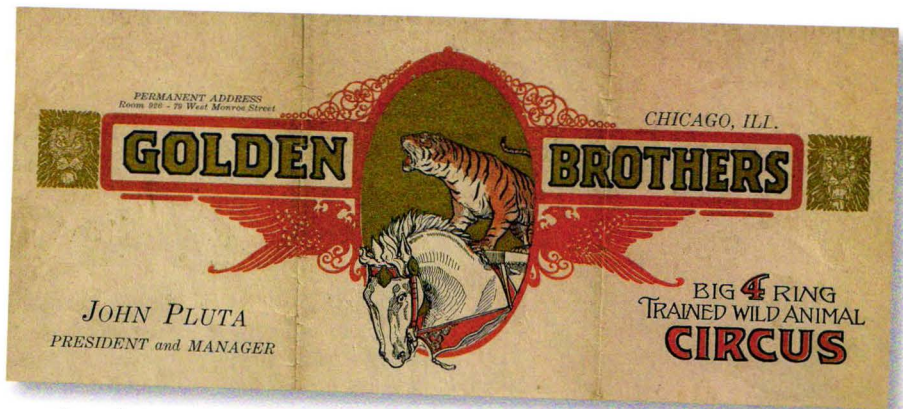
After two weeks in Southern California, the 15-car show headed east for Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Arkansas. Business was bad, and the show closed May 1 at Stuttgart, Arkansas. Herbert Duval was appointed receiver of the show in North Little Rock, and the June 7 issue of *Billboard* carried a notice of a receiver's sale and a condensed listing of the property. Bids would be accepted until June 18. (See Appendix II for a complete inventory.)

On May 16, Duval sent a telegram to Pluto: "Golden wired you immediately receipt your wire by Western Union giving you full details and price. Property in good shape could take road in ten days show intact. If interested wire you are coming on with money and will hold proposition. Exceptional rare opportunity advise you come at once."⁶ After considering the proposition, Pluto traveled to Little Rock to check on the equipment. His lawyer advised that insurance would cost fifteen dollars per thousand to cover animals, equipment, and cars against fire, derailment, and collision while en route. The insurance would only cover against fire while the show was on a siding.⁷

A telegram to Pluto from Walter Lindsey of the Riverside Printing Company in Milwaukee provides an insight into the acquisition. Riverside, which supplied most of the show's paper, obviously wanted to ensure its interest if the show stayed on the road. "This has been Riverside's stand from first notwithstanding any falsely created impressions to the contrary and certainly hope you can get show moving."⁸

Billboard reported that on June 18 Pluto bought the Golden Bros. Animal Circus intact for \$18,600. The show was not to be moved from Little Rock until it was paid for. The report said Pluto intended to open the show and put it on the road again after its rehabilitation and reorganization. It was understood that a party to the purchase was the Baker-Lockwood Company of Kansas City, although it was not explained why or how deeply the company was involved.

Billboard noted that the show had been stranded on May 7 at North Little Rock when Mrs. Golden filed suit against it for \$30,000. The story went on to say that closing the show prompted



Letterhead for the Golden Bros. Circus after Pluto bought it in the spring of 1924. Note that he still went by the name of Pluto. John Polacsek collection.

numerous suits by employees for unpaid salaries, and that the 15-car outfit was being held at the former Rock Island yards in the east end of North Little Rock.

Getting Golden Bros. moving again was a challenge. Financing came first. The Golden Bros. Trained Animals Show was incorporated under Arkansas law on June 20, 1924. Capital stock was fixed at \$100,000, or 1,000 shares at \$100 per share. Pluto issued himself stock certificate #2 of 100 shares with a face value of \$10,000. It is not known how many other shares were initially issued. Thomas F. Shiver, vice president of the National Marine Bank of Baltimore, got certificate #24 for one share.⁹

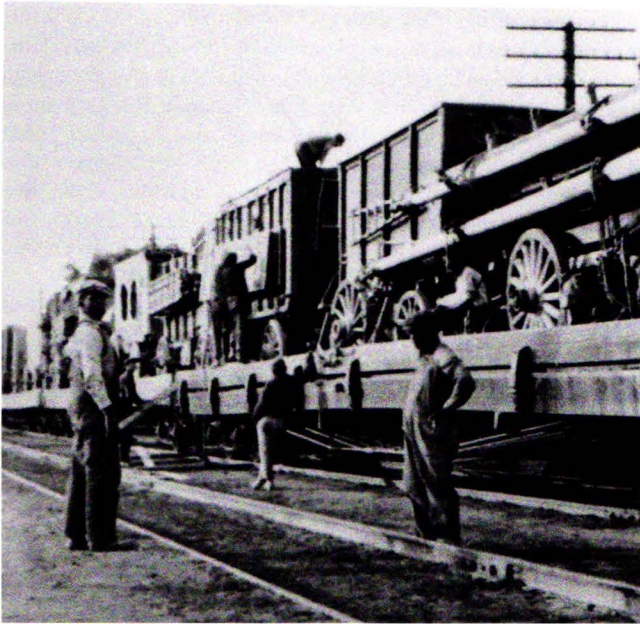
That same day, Shiver notified Pluto: "We have deposited today with United States Fidelity and Guarantee Company thirteen thousand nine hundred dollars to cover bond to be given by John Pluto. They told me they would advise agent in Little Rock by wire to issue the bond."¹⁰ With the bond secured and his investment protected, Pluto prepared to deal with advertising and the show's advance.

He needed posters, cloth banners, and the necessary paperwork for the reopening in July. The paper was coming from Riverside, which was delighted to be working with the new owner. Pluto sent Riverside a \$676 deposit for a shipment that was coming COD with a bill of \$769 to St. Louis, where the advance car now was.¹¹ Riverside hoped to keep providing the show paper and possibly recoup a little of what it had lost during the first part of the season.

A typical Riverside invoice included: 25 15-sheet show title on cloth, 6 Sets dates for a week, 3,000 Comp tickets with gold border, 750 Comp tickets for the local contractor, 750 Comp tickets for the press department, 750 Comp tickets for the trainmaster, 500 #10 envelopes for contracts, 500 #10 envelopes for car reports, 300 8½" x 17" country route blanks, 300 8½" x 7 1/3" daily report sheets for agents, 300 8½" x 14" town posting reports, 300 8½" x 14" lithographer reports, 300 8½" x 14" banner reports, 5000 Billposter contracts numbered and bound.

An order for date sheets included: 6 Sets of dates for a week, 25 8-sheet dates on paper, 40 3-sheet dates on paper, 10 3-sheet dates on cloth, 25 2-sheet dates on paper, 150 1-sheet dates on paper—flat, 25 1-sheet dates on cloth, 50 1-sheet dates on paper—up, 25 14" x 42" dates paper—up, 200 9" x 42" dates on paper—up, 50 Tack cards.¹²

Dan France of Corning, New York, wrote to Mike Golden, the ex-manager of the Golden Bros. Show, about a job on the show's advance. At that moment, however, Golden himself was unsure of his position and the letter was passed on to Pluto.¹³ A week later Golden was named assistant manager and legal adjuster. His salary was \$50 a week once the show went on the road, sometime after



Loaded flats of the Golden Bros. Circus in 1924. Pfening Archives.

July 1. Until then he'd get \$5 per day. It was further agreed that if the show made a net profit at the end of the season, Golden would receive as a bonus 10% of the net profits as an enticement to stay on.¹⁴

In his letter, France said that if the show could use a first-class general agent he was willing to come on over and provide "wonderful billing." France had guided the Rhoda Royal Show advance for four years, and he promised he could put the show into a lot of territory. "I will handle the show's advance for balance of season for \$60.00 a week and 2.5 per cent of the profits, the salary means naught to me after I pay Hotels and personal expenses. You have had a hard break so far but the season is just started now as the weather has been terrible and the Opposition fierce with them all but there is time for the Golden Show to Retrieve itself and come in under the wire in the late Fall with some money to winter on and get away in the following spring in nice shape. . . . I do not need any advances or any ticket, etc, just wire me and I'll be there. Can bring own Local Contracting Agent a long experienced man at \$50.00 Flat, and get all men necessary otherwise for the advance. With 6-7 men on the car I will bill your show off the map and put you where you will get some silver."¹⁵

The week after Pluto became owner of the show, France wired him directly, saying he was still at liberty and could work out a deal based on the information he sent to Mike Golden. He suggested Pluto advertise in *Billboard* for bill-posters and a local contractor. As long as the show was a 15-car operation, France was willing to take the job. France was hired, and wired that the advertising car had received the necessary paper and they'd be billing Jerseyville, Illinois, the last day of June. Two of the crew had arrived and another two were en route; the show was scheduled to reopen in six days, on Friday, July 4.¹⁶

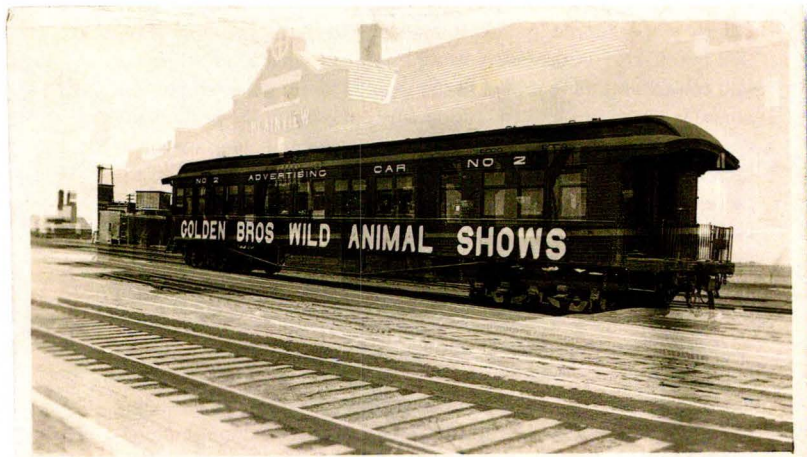
France headed to Chicago and received a wire from Frank Bottum in Minneapolis in answer to an ad in *Billboard*. Bottum would be handy back on the show as an experienced press agent, legal adjuster, advertising space salesman, and calliope player.¹⁷ France wired Bottum to join the show at Jacksonville, Illinois, on July 7. For "the price of a century" [\$100], C. L. Johnson, the bull man for

the menagerie, was coming with a boss hostler, a boss canvasman, and the trainmaster. From Petersburg, Illinois, Kern with his cornet was joining and bringing a baritone and bass for the band. France wired Pluto to "secure people various kinds that I wired. Mailed you back letters with telegram copies to Jacksonville. Get them on regardless, weed out and adjust salaries later."¹⁸ On July 7 from the Palmer House in Chicago, France wrote to Pluto advising him the Western Union draft for \$200 had just come in. France also noted that the present contractors were all capable men. There was, however, a little miscommunication regarding supplies. In addition to a daily order of a ton of hay, 30 bushels of oats, and 200 bales of straw, the show needed a half-cord of wood. "These city guys don't know what you mean when you say one rick wood," he complained. The item was correctly identified on the next requisition.¹⁹

France headed east as quickly as possible, but he had to hear from some of the railroads before setting dates. "I am going to Philadelphia and Balto soon as can to see if can make Eastern Shore of Maryland before Christy or Main or any other and hop across from Cape Charles by Ferry to Norfolk, make just one stand in VA to get across to NC points."

France explained his reason for going this route: "Rigid investigation reveals West Virginia spots mostly below fifty percent shall change route Marietta North to Pennsylvania Territory and make Maryland." France was happy to report he had closed deals with the Big Four and Baltimore and Ohio railroads and "got some good industrial stands." The Christy Show, he said, had already contracted West Virginia, and Sells Floto was routing through the same territory. It was hoped he could make the Eastern Shore of Maryland and also needed to square the Southern Railway as the show would need that line for a late-season closing in Florida.²⁰

Pluto wired France back regarding the eastward march of the show: "We have Banner man, need mileage here wire route you have laid down and proposed route immediately make no towns over five thousand/not framed yet for big show towns."²¹ It appears



The Golden Bros. Circus advance car in 1924. Pfening Archives.

that the Golden Bros. Show would take the middle ground when competition came around, but some of the towns billed were also on the route of the larger circuses.

France wrote Pluto from Corning, New York, regarding a problem with the route: "The enclosed copy of letter explains the last minute change on the B & O delivering it to the Pennsylvania, I am trying for some good small medium money spots where you can get some money into Penna—the W.Va. Territory will not do at all.



Golden Bros. advertising booklet from 1923. Pfening Archives.

Unless you order me to make some stand behind some other show that you CANT FOLLOW you will only get what kind of a town you can exhibit there in and fit the town, I know where to put you where you will fit Pluto BUT too many cooks spoil the broth many a show has lost by being routed from the stake and chain wagon to the candy butcher and that's bad stuff."²² France was proud of the fact that he had been a capable general agent for a good many years and "I kept my shows rolling as long as they wanted themselves to be that way."

France was in Scranton, Pennsylvania, when he wired Pluto about the route: "Landed Shickshinny today August thirteenth no circus in year account lot difficult. Golden Bros. will break the ice two hundred thousand dollars a month mine payroll. Will get few more top notchers in coal belt where working good. Difficult railroading account many spots three shows. Christy cleaned up, am going behind Main and Sparks only nothing larger. No animal shows will be ahead as Floto and Main back in here picking leavings."²³

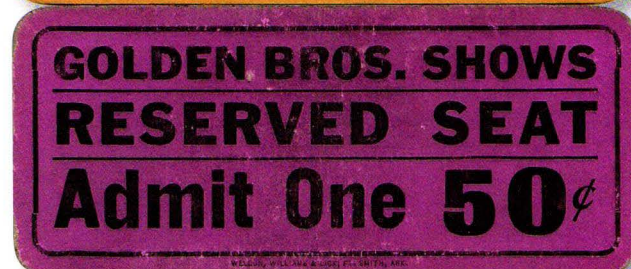
Another wire noted rosy prospects ahead: "Montgomery twelfth dandy industrial working one thousand never had big show looks good for twelve hundred. Fills open date nicely Milton thirteen Shickshinny fourteenth pay day was offered twenty five hundred flat for days business Mt. Carmel twenty thousand greatest show town ever. We need this badly for interchange no animal show yet am asking you accept it will give us three to five grands mines booming there. Daplyn reports fifty fifty conditions on his prospects made wire me some money Williamsport Saturday, Coal belt good for ten grand profit."²⁴

The route of the show through Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio followed the advance car by a week until July 26, when the car was attached while billing New Philadelphia, Ohio, for the August 2 date. Pluto got a wire: "Important you come here today. Billers about to tie up car. Quick action necessary so send money to pay off." This cryptic request for money was followed by another telegram from W. J. Daplyn, noting, "Just seen wire from Van Miller saying five best men discharged and union will tie up car. France has sixty two dollars coming wire this to pay him off here . . . send Mike Golden to Philadelphia to relieve me."²⁵

The show's lawyers in Little Rock also received a wire but had no idea what was going on with the advance car. When the show collapsed on May 1, the advance car was billing Bristol, Virginia. Apparently some suits were brought in the local court. The lawyers were later notified of claims amounting to more than \$400 that the court in Bristol allowed. The billposters had hired an attorney, but a representative of the Golden Brothers Circus attached the settlement before the money could be paid. Apparently some settlement was made with the billposters, and as part of the fallout France was paid off, and discharged as the show's general agent.²⁶

Almost immediately, W. J. Daplyn and A. C. Bradley, now routing the show, ran into a problem in Pennsylvania. The Walter L. Main Show had all of the prospective towns billed with all available daubs at Birdsboro, Epsirta, Carlisle, Gettysburg, Westminster, Shippensboro, and Hancock. The route card was issued with some of these dates, but a second one was immediately produced as the route was changed.²⁷

On August 15 A. C. Bradley wired Pluto from Philadelphia with some good news: "Daplyn and I have straightened out route on



Tickets from the Golden Bros. Circus in 1924. John Polacsek collection.

Eastern Shore and he is making Pennsylvania moves accordingly. I was delayed in getting in here owing to some contracts left open at Hazelton by contracting agent and did not get your wires until this afternoon. Daplyn changing P & R railroad contracts tomorrow putting in Tower City in place of Frackville. We make six days on Eastern Shore then across into West Virginia with present plans keeping show in West Virginia and Kentucky until Sept. eighteenth or perhaps up to twenty fifth then into Tennessee."²⁸

On the 19th, advance car manager Van Miller alerted Pluto from Clayton, Delaware, of serious opposition from the Walter L. Main



John Pluto in 1925. John Polacsek collection.

Show. To fight back he wanted to jump some of his billposters ahead of the opposition. But Van Miller had no money for the extra transportation, meals, rooms, and other expenses. "I am helpless have been using my own waiting on you, impossible to run car without money," he said.²⁹ Van Miller requested \$150 to be wired to him at Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, so he could pick up the Riverside Printing order of banners and date slips. "Don't fail me," he pleaded, "I had to pay cash for livery at Exmore and cash for bill posting at Cape Charles. Opposition with Main at Cape Charles



The 1925 Gentry-Patterson Circus was a first-class enterprise. In this image two bally boards assist the sideshow talker turn the tip. Pfening Archives.

was doing on the advance and advised, "Best you get a real general agent, carneys towns won't do for you, Sparks billing us."³¹ So in addition to the Sparks Circus now billing ahead of the show, they were being booked into towns that generally hosted carnivals.

On top of all of that, Pluto had something else on his mind. He had been approached by Al F. Wheeler, the manager of the Belmont's Trained Animal Arena that included Belmont's Derby Day Beauties, Belmont's Baby Elephants, Belmont's Polar Bears and Belmont's Good Night Lions that were being booked out of New York City. Wheeler wrote a "private" letter on August 20 to Pluto: "While I will thank you to keep this confidential, unless we should do business, I intend to put out a show on my own account again next season, and if you would name a spot cash price low enough so I could see my way clear to Winter and re-build the show I would consider buying your show complete as a going concern. While in the limited time I had to look the equipment over I could not size

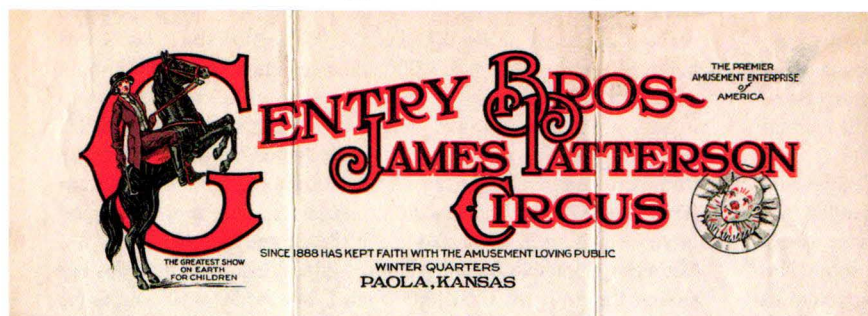
up the physical end very carefully, I know that a lot of money must be spent on the cars and wagons to put them in right shape for another season, seats must all be rebuilt, a new menagerie top added &c. which together with the long time to carry the show until the opening of another season will all run into a big sum of money. My capital being limited, it becomes necessary for me to figure carefully, so to make a long story short it will be necessary for you to name me a very low figure to interest me at this time."³²

Wheeler was a well-known showman, and it seemed clear he wanted to go on the road again. But another showman would make a deal with Pluto first.

With the Golden Bros. show in debt and badly run down, George W. Christy figured it would soon go under, so he had surrounded himself with a competent staff, including a manager ready to step in. And Christy had his cash ready.

There is no surviving correspondence between Christy and Pluto that details the transaction. But Fletcher Smith described Christy's ambitious circus activity in *Billboard*. The sale was consummated in a lawyer's office at Mooresville, North Carolina, on September 8, 1924. Christy had his new manager, Louis Chase, with him. While they were drawing up the bill of sale, Chase discovered that the show had not paid some of the employees for two weeks, and that amounted to quite a bit of money. Christy anticipated a possible problem with Pluto and wisely withheld a large amount of the cash until Pluto settled with everyone on the show later that night.

The transition was further complicated because Pluto had ruffled feathers among the staff on their proposed cut-rate final salary. One



In late 1925 Pluto and the King brothers bought the Gentry-Patterson Circus. This 1925 letterhead from the show has the interesting slogan "The Greatest Show on earth for Children" at the lower left. Pfening Archives.

COD at Norfolk cost two hundred and eighteen dollars will have expense sheet to you Wednesday. Express me all cuts you have will make up time this week."³⁰

Mike Golden had been active on the advance since the first week of August and he had just finished contracting Franklin, Virginia, for September 1st. Although Bradley and Daplyn had wanted to route the show into West Virginia after the Eastern Shore dates, it looks like the route would follow France's original plan after they crossed the Chesapeake Bay. The route called for two days in Virginia and then into North Carolina. On August 30 Golden wired Pluto that the advance car had lost a day due to not picking up the paper from Riverside, and they should have been in Mooresville, North Carolina. Golden was not pleased with the work Van Miller

of the drivers showed his rage by hiding his horses in some bushes near the railroad tracks. The show moved out minus these horses so Christy asked the railroad agent to look around. The team was soon located, loaded in a boxcar, and sent on to the circus by the next freight train.

Another sour note: the band of the Golden Bros. Show was disorganized. Everett James from the Christy Circus was brought over to straighten it out. Christy also recalled that the show's equipment, primarily the wooden railroad cars, was so bad that when the show reached winter quarters in Beaumont, Texas, most had to be burned.

Christy and Chase soon had the show on its feet and making money.

A typical day's income in North Carolina was as follows: Privilege car \$26.16, part of which was from dukies; Big Show matinee \$397.80, with 678 whole and 196 half tickets; Center Reserves \$97.50; Front Door \$16.65; Concert \$9; Big Show night performance \$402.30, with 750 whole and 92 half tickets; Center Reserves \$120; Front Door \$23.10; Concert \$14.50; Annex \$89.75 and \$94.25; Pit [Show] \$28; and Candy stands \$83.40.³³

Christy had his competent general agent Bert Rutherford route the show. It followed the route that had been laid out through the South and on through the Texas Panhandle. There it encountered snow, but business was big. One review noted, "If the Golden Show keeps up the pace it has established since it hit the South, Manager Louis Chase's Christmas gift to George W. Christy will be the Golden Show all paid for and also with winter quarters money."³⁴

1925-1926 Gentry-Patterson Circus

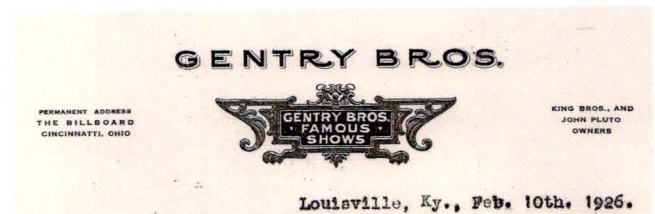
Pluto returned to manage his Globe Sales Company in Baltimore, all the while keeping his eye on the circus business. He paid particular attention to the 15-car Gentry-Patterson Circus. That show started the 1925 season out of Paola, Kansas, but soon owner James Patterson had to borrow money to keep it moving. He gave the Miami County National Bank of Paola a chattel mortgage on the property. The show found itself in areas where business conditions were bad, in states at the wrong time of the year, and in competition with other circuses and carnivals. Patterson was unable to make the payments, and it was only a matter of time until the Gentry Bros. Famous Shows Combined with Patterson's Trained Wild Animal Circus ground to a halt.

On August 31, 1925, Floyd King telegraphed Pluto saying he was not sure Patterson would sell the show, although he noted that "we would be interested to buy same with you, wish you would write him." In reality the bank was about to take over the show. The next day, L. T. Bradbury, cashier at the Paola bank, responded to Pluto's inquiry and said, "Can meet you St. Louis Thursday morning about Patterson we can talk it over."³⁵ Apparently the meeting did not take place, as there were still some unanswered questions in Pluto's mind.

The bank was interested in unloading the circus property and on September 14, King again contacted Pluto: "No doubt we will be able to buy PAT show this fall or winter." King was in Wilmington, North Carolina, and was hoping to "Keep in touch with them business OK if possible drop over and see us." He reminded Pluto to "keep in touch with us, Best Wishes from Howard and myself."³⁶

Four days later King contacted him again. "Show would not be worth as much in barn as on road, any price you agree on would be satisfactory, think would be safe paying as much as thirty five grand if necessary." King also said they'd paid off their last note on the Walter L. Main Circus, boasted of six elephants, and that their business was pulling in about fifteen grand a week.³⁷ At Conway, Arkansas, on September 18, the bank foreclosed on the Gentry-Patterson circus and closed it. The bank had the show property re-

turned to Paola and continued making plans to sell it. Flyers were circulated listing the show's assets. Evidently Pluto got one and shared the information with the Kings.



For a brief period Pluto was listed as one of the owners of the Gentry Bros. Circus on the show's letterhead. John Polacsek collection.

George Christy had gotten wind of Pluto's interest in buying the Gentry show. Since Pluto had spent a lot of time in Peru, Christy figured Pluto was trying to buy the equipment for Jerry Mugivan. But on September 21, a worried Floyd King wired Pluto: "Christy says he will pay more for show than anyone else. He is determined to get it wanting steel [railroad] equipment and especially elephants. Christy planning wild west show for next year." King was writing a long letter to Pluto that he would send in a day or two and closed with the comment, "Do you think either of us should make a trip now to Paola."³⁸ Five days later King telegraphed Pluto: "Could you meet me American Hotel St. Louis Thursday and go to Paola to see if we can buy show."

King alerted Pluto that there was competition for the Gentry-Patterson equipment. Mugivan had wired \$30,000 to try to purchase the show. George Christy had sent several wires to the bank but had not made an offer. James Shropshire, sideshow manager on the Gentry-Patterson show, told King that Patterson had something on L. T. Bradbury, the bank's cashier. He thought Patterson wanted to piecemeal the show by auction so "he can cop train." The bank hoped it could get between \$60,000 and \$90,000 for the show, but it was believed that an offer of \$30,000 and a cash note of \$10,000 might do it. With this additional information King told Pluto to meet him in St. Louis, and they would then go to Paola to try to make a deal.³⁹

In their meeting with Bank President James Sponable, King and Pluto stressed that instead of writing for photographs as the circular suggested, they had put their businesses aside and spent good money to come in person to see if they could buy the show at a fair price. Sponable was duly impressed, saying he would consider selling the property for \$40,000 cash, but that was as low as he could go.

Sold! King and Pluto each put \$1,000 down and were to come back in 10 days with another \$23,000 in cash. "That will make \$25,000 we'll pay you down for the show and will leave an indebtedness of \$15,000 due on July 1." With the deal made it was time to announce the transaction.⁴⁰

The October 25 *Billboard* printed a story datelined Kansas City, Missouri, October 16: "Gentry Bros. Circus Sold To King Bros. and John Pluto

"The deal included all the property and title of the fifteen car show. The deal was consummated at the Paola winter quarters and this was the third time in the past three decades that that the show's title had changed hands. All of the property passed into the hands of Floyd and Howard King, owners of the Walter L. Main Circus, and associated with them as an equal partner in the Gentry Bros. Circus deal was John Pluto of Baltimore.

"The equipment of the Gentry Bros. Circus is regarded by some showmen as the best of any 15 car show on the road. The property

consisted of draft horses, ring stock, Shetland ponies, three elephants, three camels, nine cages of wild animals, four sleeping cars, four stock cars, one wooden flat, five steel flat cars and one advance car. The new owners were in Kansas City making plans and it was believed that the property would be shipped East to winter with the Walter L. Main Circus.

"The King Bros. were for several years connected with various large circuses. Six years ago they organized their own show which has had a steady growth. Last fall they leased the Walter L. Main title for a term of years. John Pluto is equally as well known in the circus world, having at various times been connected with the larger shows. Last season he purchased the Golden Bros. Circus and after operating it successfully for some time disposed of it, his commercial interests in Baltimore requiring all his time."

Pluto sent his brother Michael to look over the stock, which included 56 baggage horses, 26 ponies, 10 manège horses, two bare-back horses, five fill-in horses, and three mules. The winter quarters could only hold a limited number of horses, and part of the baggage



After going in with the Kings to buy the Gentry-Patterson show in late 1925, Pluto sold his interest to them in February 1926. Floyd and Howard King became sole owners. Floyd King is shown here in 1960 when he was general agent for the Beatty-Cole Circus. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo, Pfening Archives.

stock had to be put eight miles out in the country on a pasture. This reduced the amount of hay and grain needed in the stables, making both the bank and the new owners happy because it helped reduce expenses at the Paola winter quarters.⁴¹

The November 7 *Billboard* reported that the Gentry Bros. Circus show train and equipment had been shipped from Paola to its new winter quarters in Louisville. The buildings were a former brewery, shuttered by Prohibition. The grounds contained a blacksmith and paint shop, ring and animal barns, and stables. Draft horses were placed on a farm near New Albany, Indiana, about 18 miles away. Rail cars were parked on the north side of the Ohio River on unused Government property at Jeffersonville, Indiana.⁴²

During the 1925 season, King formulated plans to enlarge the Walter L. Main Circus from a 10-car show to 15. The show needed extra train space to house the workingmen who in the fall of the year suffered from the cold while riding beneath the wagons on the flats. He said that both his brother and Pluto agreed with the plan, which was one reason they bought the Gentry-Patterson equipment.

The deal was to pay Pluto his portion of the five cars of equipment that were to be transferred to the Walter L. Main Circus.

While the show was settling down in winter quarters, some odd happenings were about to unfold. Michael Pluto was left to take care of things in the Louisville quarters because John had to manage his Globe Sales Company back in Baltimore. In late December Michael wrote to his brother, but John was in New York on business. John's wife answered the letter, and spilled the beans. She said John had revealed to her that "you [Michael] did the buying and made a profit on buying." In other words, Michael was padding the bills and making a small profit as he bought supplies for the show. Somehow the Kings found out about it and were very unhappy. Michael immediately wrote to John, letting his brother know that his "profit is shot and I buy at rock bottom prices and no chance now as Mr. Howard King and Dobson his book keeper want bills before they cool off." Michael claimed that he was "too smart to let them get anything on me for a few cents, they are both bright but I still have a way of getting things done."⁴³

They had expected to have enough money to carry the operation all winter. But that wasn't how it was working out. When he'd left Louisville for Baltimore, John had turned over the bank account to Michael, \$414.94. Michael withdrew \$300 to buy material to keep the men working. That wasn't enough. The quarters needed three cars of hay, some gold leaf, and other small items. Apparently Howard King was not around to provide any money, and neither was Floyd. So Michael tapped in to Pluto's money to pay the bills. Michael had started with \$20 in his pocket. He then withdrew \$100 to pay his room rent, laundry, and meals along with doctor and medicine bills. He'd been sick in bed for a week. So by the second week of January there was only \$14.94 left in the bank.

Michael was managing five men in winter quarters and providing the necessary supplies. He was upset because the Kings were claiming that "I monkey with the figures, which I do not do" and they wanted the bills every night so that they know where their money is going, and furthermore he [Michael] was there "to see that his brother John got a square deal."

Michael had been in the Louisville winter quarters since October 9th, and his bankroll was running out. He pointed out that he was saving the show money by shrewd dealing, but he just couldn't get anything for himself. He complained that he had a wife back in Baltimore, and it was difficult to provide for her when there was very little coming in. He told John that he was ready to leave and said John might well consider his own pleasant situation where his wife was with him and she had everything her heart desired.

John was told he'd better come to Louisville because Michael was going to leave in a week. "I know I can make 50 dollars a week and see my wife at least once or twice a week or a month," Michael whined, "and I know you would sooner let Kings steal 2 or 3 hundred a week from you than let me have a few dollars to pay my expense so you can either send me money or else. Relieve me at your earliest I don't care what you do, I will stay until I spend the other \$14.94 which is all the money I have left in the bank."

Michael softened a bit. He really needed a new pair of pants, and said that if given at least "some" money he would stay until the "band plays on the 15th of April." Michael then related a story that the bull man McPherson, who was on the Golden Show with them, recounted: "While I was out buying, Howard and Floyd [King] came together between the monkey cages and boxes. Howard busted Floyd and run him all around the cages and had mail scattered all over the place. I heard them fighting all morning. . . . Howard tried to tell me what I must do as he was boss as Floyd was away and I told him he was boss just like I was—so get on the job.



Pluto proposed making Sylvester L. "Buster" Cronin part owner of the Gentry Bros., but he was rejected by the Kings. Cronin is shown here on right at an industry function, probably in 1940s With him are his wife and Irving J. Polack of the Polack Bros, Circus. Pfening Archives.

... Floyd is bluffed by Howard and I want him to try and bluff me and I will make him eat his gun that he carries."⁴⁴

Realizing his difficult position with the Kings, in January 1926 John Pluto turned to Sylvester L. "Buster" Cronin. Cronin knew Pluto was in the middle of a pickle with few options.

"Friend Pluto—Have been trying to figure out some way that

wanted to battle it out as they could refuse to take me on as a partner. . . . Call up Mugivan again and see what he suggests. . . . P.S. When Kings hear of enclosed letter will be upset again and make you an offer to buy all of your interest."⁴⁵

Cronin was interested in working with Pluto, but not with Howard and Floyd King. On the other side of the coin, Floyd recounted his version of the breakup and sale of Pluto's interests: "In January 1926 I went to Baltimore and told Pluto that we had engaged most of the people but we had to buy some tents and I wanted to talk to him about it. At that time he advised me that his business was such that he had given up the idea of wanting part of the circus and he would like to sell it to me. However, I told him he ought to stick along with us and I left Baltimore and went on to New York on business. About a week later I got back to Louisville. Pluto's brother was in winter quarters. He represented his brother and told me that John and Sylvester L. (Buster) Cronin were in town at the Henry Watterson Hotel. I went down to the Watterson Hotel and saw Pluto and Buster Cronin. Cronin told me that he was in Louisville to buy Pluto's interest in the Gentry Bros. Circus. I went back to quarters and told my brother, Howard, about this and he told me that he had been connected with Mr. Cronin on the John Robinson Circus. And his opinion was that he would not be a satisfactory partner for us, and he thought the best thing we could do was scrape up enough money to buy Pluto's interest—which at that time, the cost of shipping it from Paola to Louisville and wintering it on up to February—his half amounted to about \$17,500, which I paid Pluto in February of 1926."⁴⁶

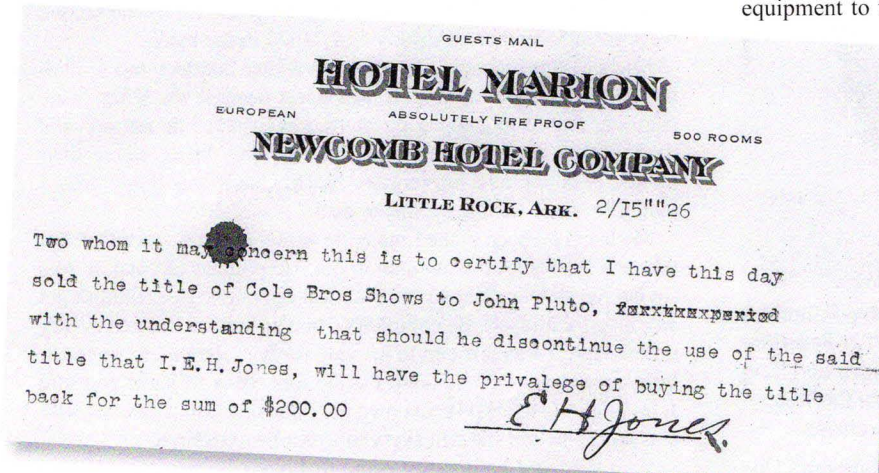
On February 11 John Pluto sold his part of the Gentry-Patterson equipment to the King brothers after he received \$17,504.00. He sold his interest and equity in the Gentry Bros.

Circus as purchased from the Miami County National Bank at Paola, Kansas the previous October. From the Watterson Hotel, Pluto advised L. T. Bradbury, the cashier of the bank, that he had disposed of his interest in the Gentry Bros. Circus to the King Brothers. Pluto was informed that the King Brothers had also sent a letter to that effect on February 12th. Bradbury was "pleased to know that you have dissolved partnership in such a satisfactory and friendly manner and then too that the property is in such good condition."⁴⁷

With money in his pocket Pluto immediately headed for Little Rock where he made a deal with Elmer H. Jones to buy one baggage car Number 2, one combination car Number 9, one 70- x 130-foot tent, one 40- x 20-foot tent, six ponies and trap-

pings, one leopard, one large lion, one young lion, 16 lengths of blue seats, one set of steel runs, and one Delco lighting plant. In addition to the equipment, he received the Cole Brothers title with the understanding that should Pluto discontinue the use of the Cole Brothers title, Jones would have the first option to buy the title back for \$200. After paying a \$1,000 deposit Pluto had 30 days to come up with the other \$3,500.⁴⁸

Notification that Pluto was the owner of the Cole Brothers title was also sent to J. R. Lowe, manager of the Erie Litho & Printing Company in Erie, Pennsylvania. This gave Pluto the right to have Erie Litho print the Cole Brothers title on posters. The show had only a small amount of printed paper on the shelves, with most styles counting fewer than 100 sheets. The show had used the following: 20-sheet Tiger & Title; 12-sheet Monkey & Baboon; 9-sheet Manège, 8-sheet Acrobats, Wire Act; 6-sheet Clowns, Clown & Mule, Japanese; 4-sheet Leopards, 3-sheet Clowns, Dog



Not long after parting ways with the Kings, Pluto purchased some equipment from Elmer Jones, the king of two-car shows. He also purchased the Cole Bros. title to which Jones may or may not have had the rights. John Polacsek collection.

I could go ahead and buy in as we had planned but with Kings as they are do not feel like going ahead and buying in for only mean trouble all around. They had it all set in their mind to give you a good trimming and naturally knew they could not do that to me more so after your talk to Mugivan. As Mugivan says the property is well worth \$100,000 and you would be very foolish to allow them to split it up for you would have nothing left but junk. If they would sell their share he will buy it all then sell me back half of it or let you and I retain half with him. . . . Mugivan suggested you have me look after your interest then cut in along when time to open then with show built they would talk easier to me. My lawyer here says he would not advise me to buy as conditions are unless I

Act, General Interior; One-sheet Ponies, Bears, Lions, Leopards, Aerial, Clown Band, Clown & Pig, Statuary, Clown & Mule; 6-sheet Streamer; ½-sheet Butterfly, Aerialist, Leopards.⁴⁹

Floyd King recalled that when he and his brother purchased Pluto's interest, they gave him an option on an 80-foot baggage car that had formerly been used in passenger service on the John H. Sparks Circus. Pluto put a deposit of \$100 on it. The car was about 74 feet long, equipped with six-wheel trucks, auto doors at each end and qualified for passenger service. The price of the car was \$1,000, the balance due March 19, with Pluto agreeing to forfeit the deposit if the sale did not go through.⁵⁰

In March Pluto paid \$30 to the United States Cast Iron Pipe & Foundry Company in Louisville for a month's rent on five stables, a lot for horses and ponies, and an office. Brother Michael and Jake Friedman were there to water and fed everything. And they were ready to buy lumber to build shifting cages to house the lions and leopard while they repaired and painted their regular cages.⁵¹

About the same time, John H. Barry of Barry's Trained Animal Acts out of Chicago contacted Pluto saying he'd heard Pluto was framing a five-car show and offering to sell a couple of railroad cars. One was a very nice 77-foot Pullman with side and end doors, big possum bellies, special shelves and racks for poles, and a sleeping compartment for 16 men. The car was in Chicago and said to be a bargain at \$800. Barry also had in Kansas City an 80-foot Pullman sleeper with a kitchen, two staterooms, and berths for 80 people. This one included all dishes, some bedding, an icebox, range, and special-built possum bellies, for \$2,500. Michael Pluto requested that John, stop in Chicago and look at the \$800 car and also check the stockyards there for horses.⁵²

By April John had decided against taking a show on the road from the Louisville quarters. He owned the Cole Bros. title and some circus equipment, but it was not enough for a two-car or five-car show, and early in April he began leasing some of his equipment.

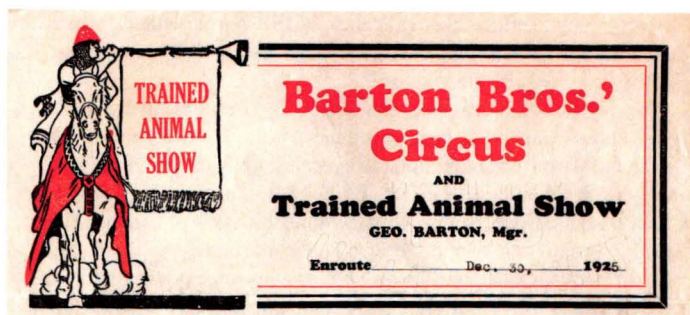
The sleeping car he'd purchased in February 1926 from Jones went to Floyd and Howard King to use on Gentry Bros. The six-month lease was for \$40 per month. If the King Bros. decided to purchase the car, they could have it for \$900 cash with rental monies applied toward the purchase price. The King brothers paid \$80 for two-months rent in advance and paid on time until November 14.⁵³

In late July, business on both King-owned circuses had been very good, and Floyd announced they had paid off two of the notes to the Paola bank. With the Gentry Show playing the Eastern Shore of Maryland on Labor Day, Floyd contacted Pluto, suggesting he bring his wife from Baltimore and spend several days with the show as his guest.⁵⁴

1926 Barton Bros. Circus

In the spring of 1926 the Barton Bros. Circus, managed by George and Lou Barton, decided to enlarge, and George Barton went to Louisville looking for equipment. Michael Pluto acted as his agent, and on April 10 arranged a nine-month lease-purchase agreement, at \$40 a month, for a baggage car with a lease-end option to apply his rent toward a purchase price of \$1,100. Barton agreed to keep the baggage car in a suitable condition to operate on his show train, and at the end of the nine months the car would revert back to Pluto's ownership.⁵⁵

Three days later two agreements were made between Pluto and Barton. Pluto sold a gasoline light plant for \$200 and leased Barton 16 lengths of circus seats, including stringers and jacks, for \$20 per length. Barton could sell or lease these with Pluto receiving all the revenue. Again, Michael Pluto acted as agent. Barton paid \$120



In early 1926 Pluto leased railroad equipment to George Barton for his Barton Bros. Circus, whose letterhead is shown here. Pfening Archives.

in advance on the baggage car, which covered rent from May 1 to August 1.⁵⁶

By September the Barton Bros. Show was behind on the lease of the baggage car and other equipment. John Pluto wrote to the Erie Lithograph to see if they knew the whereabouts of the Barton Show. George Lux replied that his firm also had been trying to locate it. Apparently since the first part of August, there were unpaid items on their books for printing shipped during June and July. The printers also had checked with *Billboard* but could not find a Barton route and presumed the show had closed.⁵⁷

Subsequently a notice was issued for the public sale of railroad rolling stock and contents to be held on March 22, 1928, at the siding on Grant Street in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. The property was described as personal property upon which the Pennsylvania Railroad Company had a lien for storage charges. The owners were listed as George Barton, Flemington, New Jersey; Dr. S. J. O'Brien,

In 1929 Pluto bought the E. E. Coleman Circus in mid-1929. Elbert Coleman stayed in the circus business after selling to Pluto. He is shown right on the right on his M. L. Clark Circus in Crystal Lake, Illinois on June 21, 1945. Burt Wilson albums, Pfening Archives.



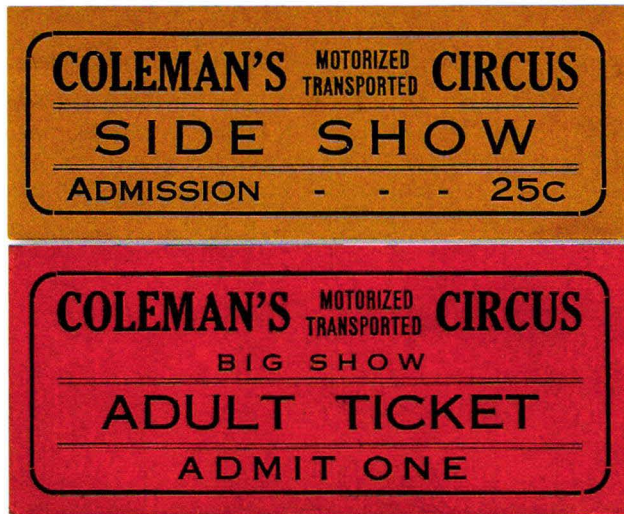
Yonkers, New York; and J. J. Blanck of Pittsburgh. Blanck was a dealer in secondhand show property and operated a railroad car facility in Verona, Pennsylvania.⁵⁸

The sale notice provided the following descriptions: Barton Bros. Circus Car No. 8, a sleeping car with a wooden body, built by the Pullman Company; outside overall length 72 feet 10 inches, semi-vestibule ends. It had 38 side windows and ran on two six-wheel trucks equipped with United States Safety Appliances. The brakes were in good running order. The inside equipment included built-in bunks, closet, and lavatories, one lot of car cushions, one folding chair, one small secretary, and one lot of harness. The Barton Bros. Circus Car No. 9, an equipment car with a wooden body, outside overall length 72 feet 10 inches. It also ran on two six-wheel trucks equipped with U.S. Safety Appliances, and the brakes were in good running order. The inside equipment included one lot of tent poles, a wagon, a 23- x 26- x 35-inch fireproof safe, one blacksmith forge, one lot of seat trestles and seats, a small tent, one Milburn acetylene light, one three-quarter inch block and fall, and 150 feet of three-quarter inch rope.⁵⁹

1926-1927 Opportunities

Nearly all of the equipment was gone from Pluto's Louisville winter quarters. Remaining were a 4-year-old male lion, a 22-month-old female lion, and a 4-year-old leopard. To save the expense of feed, Michael Pluto sold them to William Senning, proprietor of a recreation park in Louisville that booked picnics and dances. The animals provided an added attraction.

Senning paid \$900 for the three, with the first \$300 due in April



Tickets for the E. E. Coleman Circus in 1929. John Polacsek collection.

and the remaining \$600 to be paid during the park season of not more than six months. Senning was to pay for feed and medical care, and assume any and all liabilities, court costs, and lawyers' fees in case these animals did any damage. Michael Pluto sent the \$300 check to his brother and told Senning to pay the balance anytime between April 17 and October 16. At one point, John Pluto was informed the leopard's head had swollen badly, but Senning was able to find an animal man to save it.⁶⁰

In October 1926 George W. Christy wrote to John Pluto with a deal. Christy said he'd heard that "you desire to get back into the big Circus business again." Christy offered the Lee Bros. 15-car show for sale complete as a going enterprise, and also the complete three-car Golden Bros. show. He noted that over the previous year

since he had bought the Golden show from Pluto, he'd spent some \$75,000 to upgrade it. The show had some new baggage wagons with wide wheels, new tableaux wagons, and some new rail cars. The show had a big season and was still doing good business; it planned to close November 20 at Freeport, Texas. Christy said operating two shows was too much for him. "It is impossible," he said, "to watch two at once and get results."⁶¹

After the Lee Bros. Show closed, Christy wrote Pluto that he had 10 cages with animals, manége horses, 12 ponies, a number of dogs, lions, three camels, and two elephants available. There was also new equipment, new wagons, railroad cars, good wardrobe, the same-size tents, along with more and better seats. The whole could be purchased for \$45,000, but he warned there were "four other parties dickering." A month later Christy wrote Pluto: "You still have a chance at Lee Bros. Show complete if you want to buy it; price will go up in the spring." The show's advance car had a lot of paper and was ready to go.⁶²

Christy may have thought Pluto was trying to get back into the circus business because Pluto was talking to John Ringling. In reality, Charles Hunt during the winter of 1926-1927 had been talking with Ringling about buying one of the five baby elephants at the Bridgeport winter quarters. One day Hunt and Pluto drove up to look over the babies. Hunt really wanted a baby elephant, so he had one of his trucks follow them to Bridgeport. Hunt had had his eye on an elephant named Eva, but the superintendent of the Ringling herd strongly suggested he take a younger bull named Dolly. Hunt knew little or nothing about elephants. But Dolly looked good enough to him and by the time the truck arrived he'd bought and paid for Dolly.

Dolly had never been in a truck before. It took the entire crew using a block and tackle to load her. An extra hind leg chain kept her from charging forward into the cab. Hunt learned later that Dolly was trouble, and all the elephant men wanted to get her out of the barn.

The long road trip to Bridgeport gave Pluto an opportunity to feel out Hunt about possibly buying into the show or buying it in its entirety. Said Hunt: "I had told other people who had approached me with the same idea that I had starved to keep the show going and now that I had it paying off I would be a supreme chump to sell it or any part of it."⁶³

After being turned down by Hunt, Pluto went to the Downie Bros. Wild Animals Circus winter quarters at Havre de Grace, Maryland, to talk to Andrew Downie. There, Pluto purchased from the "largest motor circus in the world" animal cages Nos. 7 and 9. He put down \$200, with a balance of \$200 due before the cages were to be removed on or before April 1, 1927.⁶⁴

At the same time Pluto had Jake Friedman, who had worked for him before, look for more equipment. In Montgomery, Alabama, Friedman located an 80-foot round tent with two 30-foot middles used only five months, along with all seats, poles, and stakes. The tent was from the Rhoda Royal Circus. Pluto was told he could buy the complete show, with the exception of the trucks, dirt cheap.⁶⁵

In April Pluto received an urgent wire from Floyd King. He needed to borrow \$3,000 for 30 days to get two shows on the road. The Gentry Bros Show was ready to leave winter quarters on April 16 and the Walter L. Main Show was opening in Lexington on the 22nd. It already was April 6. "Don't fail me Johnny," King pleaded. In exchange King would "give you [Pluto] a bill of sale on Col. Gentry's bulls and pay you big rate of interest plus expenses of your trip both ways." The next day Pluto telegraphed King to "Come up with Bill of sale etc. can't get away," and the loan was consummated.⁶⁶



E. E. COLEMAN'S CIRCUS

—AND—
TRAINED ANIMAL SHOWS

E. E. COLEMAN
General Manager

General Offices
DAYTON, OHIO



Letterhead for the 1929 E. E. Coleman Circus. Pfening Archives.

1929 Cole Bros Circus—Part I

Little was heard from Pluto until late in 1928 when his name showed up in *Billboard* where it was noted that Floyd and Howard King were breaking relations with Walter L. Main and needed a new title. Main would not lease his title to the Kings for 1929. Floyd's show would get the new title while Howard kept the Gentry Bros. name. Pluto owned the Cole Bros. Circus title, having bought it from E. H. Jones a few years previously. One version had Floyd and Howard King paying \$25 weekly for the use of it. *Billboard* said rights to the Cole title were leased from Pluto for a term of years. Floyd King claimed later that Pluto let them use it free. Letters from Floyd to John mention in several cases the leasing of the title, which was not free the first year.⁶⁷

The 1929 season started off with a flurry of activity. In February Floyd King wrote on a Cole Brothers letterhead from Alexandria, Louisiana, to "Governor Cole." He wanted Pluto to know "that everything is okay here at the head office of the Great Cole Bros. World-Toured Shows." They were fixing up the show, and boss painter Mike Carey, who painted the Sparks Circus for eight years, was doing a wonderful job on the parade equipment.⁶⁸

Floyd was sure that when Pluto visited the show he would be pleased with everything. The presence of Pluto also meant that Floyd had an angel in his pocket. The Wabash Valley Trust Company of Peru, Indiana, received a memo typed on the letterhead of the American Circus Corporation, which recorded a note for \$1,500 from Floyd King to John Pluto due on demand and dated May 3, 1929. Apparently Floyd either sold something to Pluto or loaned him money because the note had the citation "bears no interest." The next day Floyd wired Pluto from Staunton, Illinois, with both good and bad news. At Belleville, Illinois, on May 3 they'd put on three shows. Receipts were \$3,392 and the privileges \$812. But the lot on May 4 at Staunton was under water so they would lose that town.⁶⁹

Pluto's presence on the Cole Bros. Circus was also important to Walter L. Main. On April 5 Main wrote Pluto, "If you are going to visit the Cole Show anytime I would like to meet you somewhere first and have a good long talk." Main reminded Pluto of a previous letter and would "keep it confidential and if you will keep my missives the same I will try and make you some silver." Pluto was requested to provide the opening date of the show and its route, and Main would try to arrange a meeting with him.⁷⁰

Three weeks later Pluto, hot under the collar, sent a steaming telegram to Main saying he was upset by Main's tactics of issuing "ratbills" against the Cole Circus or authorizing them to be "mailed to different localities to people who are of no concern to you or lavy and gin parties from whose office the same was mailed." These tactics were to be stopped as Pluto had letters found in four different places and he was "very familiar with the postal laws enough

to teach you and your mercenary parties." Pluto also said the title Cole Brothers Circus was of no interest to Main and he was surprised that Main would "stoop so low to methods of that nature regarding reflections on show." Pluto was ready to start legal proceedings unless he heard from Main regarding this matter. The exact text of the ratbills is unknown, but they surely upset Pluto.⁷¹

Main shot back: "If you wish to see me for friendship sake or on account of my age or concerning some future business proposition I will be glad to meet you in Pittsburgh at any time convenient to you." Main said he had spent five decades in the circus business and faced "plenty of legal actions and threats and another more or less will not cause me any undue worry."⁷²

Pluto cooled a bit and replied he would be glad to meet Main and "do business with you in the right way, all based on principle." Noting Main's 50 years in the business, Pluto recounted that "I am not of the bluffing kind or threatening kind but of a sure, determined kind that usually does what he outlines, as the most foolish thing in the world for me to do would to try and bluff or threaten you." More so, Pluto was "calling your attention to something that I know you were instrumental in and undertaken by others who are not very well versed in higher procedure than local or state affairs and when it would come to a case of running for cover the alibi would have been by pointing their finger at you."⁷³

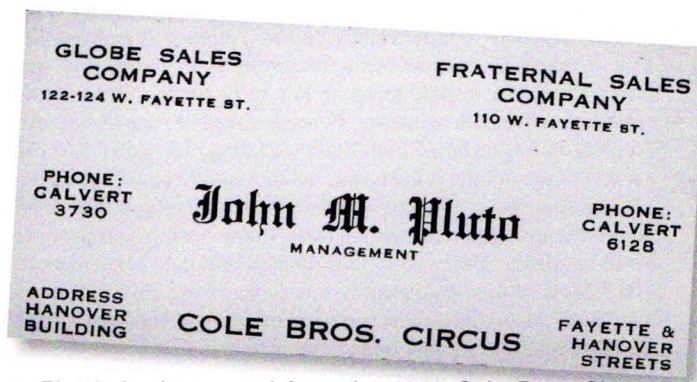
Pluto further noted that Main was "a disinterested party to any conduction of business of Kings, and etc., and when you try too, you are breaking a principle that as I wired you, has reactions to same, and I am sorry the whole matter has went as far as it has, which is uncalled for." Pluto allowed as how a future business relation might be hurt as "our past deeds are sometimes preventers of our future deals that we would like to do."⁷⁴

Pluto was hoping to reconcile with Main and let him know he had established the Cole Brothers Circus Eastern Office in Baltimore. There, staffers were busy supporting the circus on tour. It was a beautiful office in the heart of the city, outfitted with six desks and other furniture on par with the office of the American Circus Corporation in Peru. Robert Denmead of Sparks Circus fame managed the operation. Pluto stepped in "on necessary parts and all that require my personal attention." The office was also headquarters of the Fraternal Distributing Company, another of Pluto's enterprises. Pluto represented himself as president of that company and as a nephew of the Cole brothers, of the Cole Brothers Circus.⁷⁵

The Cole show opened April 17, 1929, at Princeton, Kentucky, and played through Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. It then moved into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and through Oklahoma for the month of October.

In May Pluto traveled with the show through Wisconsin. At Portage he met the mayor and discussed a money-raising campaign with him. In a follow-up letter, Pluto wrote that his organization was "making money for other organizations throughout the Country, so why not let us make it for YOU and the Wisconsin State Firemen's Association." The idea of a local or state fund-raising campaign had an appeal, and Pluto's company was there to help.⁷⁶

Charles T. Hunt of Hunt's Circus corresponded with Pluto in June and said business was better around New York City than in the sticks. He chatted about business and noted he had just added two trucks, a Chevy and a two-ton Graham Bros. truck.⁷⁷ Pluto responded that he had been in Ohio looking over two small shows, both complaining of bad weather and poor attendance. The same day Pluto sent a follow-up wire to the Ketrow Bros. Circus in Rochester, New York. He had requested their route when he was in Wisconsin a few weeks before visiting with Floyd King and had not



Pluto's business card from the 1930 Cole Bros. Circus. John Polacsek collection.

received an answer. He still wanted their route to see if they could do some business.⁷⁸

1929 Coleman-Pluto Circus

On June 16, E. E. Coleman wired Pluto that he would take \$9,000 cash for his circus. The subsequent transaction put Pluto back in the game as an owner. The story of the 1929 Coleman-Pluto Circus has already been covered in a January-February 1999 *Bandwagon* article by Joseph Bradbury. A few new pieces of correspondence can be added to the story, taken from the author's collection.

The first is a telegram from Mike Pluto in Wolcottville, Indiana, to John in which Mike says they need \$5,000 to close the Coleman deal. Another problem was that many of the employees had "walked away and now [we] have three workingmen, two musicians, band leader, drummer, electrician, hostler, chief bull man and wife does ladder and dogs." Other performers each did two or three acts. Mike complained about the high price for the Maloon act but commented that he "can give whole show himself, horse trainer, manager, and concert." Repairs to seats, the ring, and other things would be done when there were enough workingmen. A banner painter from the Gentry show was in Dayton, and it was hoped Coleman would send his address so he could come to paint the show, for there was not a flag of any kind on the show. There was no stationery, and the stock of hard tickets included 1,600 adult, 1,700 children, and 1,300 reserved seats.⁷⁹

The second is a bill of sale dated July 30, 1929, between Pluto and the John Robinson Shows Company. For \$501 a selection of second-hand goods were sold as is FOB, from the winter quarters at Peru. The Robinson company was represented by its president, Jerry Mugivan. Included were: 2 Dog Chariots, 1 Elephant Tub, 2 Swinging Ladders, 6 Nickel Plated Posts, 6 Old Chairs, 2 Long Spears, 3 Animal Trainers Coats, 4 Saddle Covers, 5 Small Capes, 6 Two piece suits, 1 Bull Fight Suit, 8 Turbans, 4 Caps for Ladies, 5 Drivers Caps, 2 Butterfly for Iron Jaw, 4 Orange Caps, 4 Ballet Dresses, 1 Large Elephant Blanket, 12 Gongs, 1 Elephant Harness, 1 Set Pony Harness with collars, 1 Old Umbrella and pipe, 3 Old Blankets, 1 Complete Prima Donna Outfit, 1 Large Cape, 8 Band Capes, 1 Hat and Cape for Band leader, 5 Ladies Suits, 10 Headpieces, 4 Ticket Sellers Caps, 4 Red Caps, 1 Miniature Cage.⁸⁰

The third is a letter on a Coleman Bros. Combined Circus letterhead, written by Jack LeBair to Sam B. Dill: "Just a few lines to notify you, like we agreed about the show. The Court delayed us another week to give John Pluto a chance to get a buyer that would be willing to pay more for show. But the Court gave orders

that the show must be sold Thursday Oct. 24th. Coleman offered two thousand for animals, big top, menagerie and wardrobe. You told Mr. Duvall and I that you were willing to give three thousand dollars for entire show. Well I expect you can buy for that price. If you still want the show, let me know at once, so I can notify Mr. York the Receiver."⁸¹

Pluto had just lost a circus that he had hoped to rescue. After court costs were paid, Pluto returned to the Cole Bros. show for a short time in October. He needed a positive feeling about the circus, for under the Cole Bros. title he could call himself John Pluto Cole.

1929 Cole Bros. Circus—Part II

John went home to Baltimore where, in November, Floyd King telegraphed from McGregor, Texas, to "Dear Gov Coleman." It was an unusual opening, given that Pluto had just lost his circus. Now, King said, the Cole Bros. show was in trouble. King wrote, "on account of continued bad weather and business we are closing season Saturday in Brenham, Texas. Stop. Will you please wire me two centuries [\$200] or as much as possible so I can get away for a week or ten days and promote some capital to winter on. Stop. I have you safely protected with Modoc. John please don't disappoint as situation is most critical."⁸²

While the show went into winter quarters Floyd was looking after the elephant Modoc, one of Pluto's acquisitions, and trying to get a short-term loan. Pluto wired \$150 to King, enabling him to go to Chicago.

In December King wrote again: "Friend Johnny—I dropped you a line last Thursday with a S. R. O. call and mailed it care Fraternal Distributing Co., 110 W. Fayette Street. I surely hate to bother you John as I know it was very tough for you last summer and still bad, but you know how tough it was for me. I wish you would please wire me \$150 and let it apply on Modoc. I am entirely without dough and hotel bill due. I would not ask you Johnny, but don't know to whom other I can look too, and you know I have secured you with the elephant.



Cole Bros. flats at Douglass, Arizona, April 9, 1930. Charles Puck photo, Pfening Archives.

"Fred Buchanan called me up on the phone from Granger, Iowa. He wants to buy the Cole Bros. Circus if he can get it for about a thousand dollars. But the National Printing Co. says that they will burn it up before they will let Buchanan steal it. Buchanan also wants Modoc, as does Christy and John Ringling. I really think something will develop this week. The National Printing Co. wants to help me and save the show for me."



Draft stock ready to pull baggage wagons with side poles on sides off the train, Douglass, Arizona, April 9, 1930. Charles Puck photo, Pfening Archives.

Clearly the elephant Modoc was an asset that a number of circus men were interested in, and the National Printing Co. in Chicago was providing money to keep the show in winter quarters, but advancing nothing to King.⁸³

1930 Cole Bros. Circus

On January 3, 1930, Floyd King wrote a lengthy letter to Pluto about his travels and travails over the past month. He sorely needed a friend, especially a friend with some dough to lend. This missive is doubly valuable for all the insights it provides on proposed but unrealized plans that were floated in the immediate aftermath of Black Friday. The market crash had changed everything, especially the availability of cash and credit.

"Friend Johnny," wrote King, "I suppose you wonder what in the hell of a stiff I am, why I have not written, why I did not thank you for saving my life in wiring me the \$150 to Brenham, Texas, on November 9 etc. Well, Johnny after you left the show last fall we were out ten days and the business ran from \$400 to \$900 per day so you know the kind of finish we had. Yet no one complained and we put the show away in winter quarters at Brenham, Texas—71 miles from Houston. I stayed around there several days and then came North. I owed the National Printing & Engraving Co., Chicago, 5 grands and Howard owed the[m] 15 grands—and had to give them a first mortgage on the show. However, they said they did not want the show but wanted me to continue if it took me five years to pay off the mortgage. Since the show closed they have been sending around \$150.00 per week down there to winter on. I went to see Mr. Mugivan at Peru. He wanted to buy the Cole Bros. Show and Gentry Bros., ship them into West Baden and make a 25 car independent show out of it and call it Cole Bros. He figured it would take seventy five to one hundred thousand dollars to pull it on the lot clear but figured the show would pay for itself the first year and more. I was to get a salary as general agent until the show paid for itself and then 25% of the stock. After going to West Baden and staying there with Mugivan and Bowers for two or three days he jockeyed along for two or three weeks and the deal fell through, as Bowers did not want to [be] in on it. So that ended that. I went to Sarasota, Fla., and was down there 9 days and saw Mr. John Ringling four five times. One time we talked up in his office from 11:30 P.M. until 1:00 A.M. He said it was too bad about the Cole Bros., and Gentry Bros., but I told him the Gentry Show collapsing was the main cause of my financial trouble. He offered to give me a job at \$125.00 per week, also wanted to buy your elephant MODOC, the other two elephants on the show, and the six steel

cars. I told him I would let him know. I just got back from Florida Tuesday of this week. I saw Chas. Sparks in Macon, Georgia and he is almost cookoo over selling his show but as he has lost his nerve, I don't think he will get back in it soon. . . . Well, John this is the situation, it looks as if no one wants to buy a circus, and as it is only 90 days before the Cole Bros. Show should open up and shoot across into New Mexico, Ariz., and California, I believe at the last minute the National Printing Co., will advance about ten grands which will get the [show] out and give me a chance to pay them off. John if you were interested you could get a half interest in this show for eight or ten grands. But I know you had a tough break with your truck show last summer. Johnny I figure I owed you \$900.00 and you wired me \$150.00 more to Brenham and that I owe you \$1050.00 on borrowed cash

plus the interest and not to say the title rent. Well, the minute we landed in the closing stand Brenham, Texas I went up to the court house and had recorded the bill of sale on the elephant Modoc to you. Because I figured if anything happened I wanted to protect you for the borrowed cash, and as the elephant is such a wonderful one, and Christy, Fred Buchanan and John Ringling all want him, I figure she would bring at the least amount about \$4,000.00 or more. I made the bill of sale out for \$5800.00 so no one could cop her. In the mortgage to the National I made note of the fact that the elephant was your property. When I talked with Mr. Ringling he said if I could get him the other two elephants and the 6 cars that he could make arrangements with John Pluta for the elephant Modoc and mail you draft for same. I said yes if the show is sold at piece meal or I don't take it out." [In the author's collection there is an envelope from John Ringling to John Pluto, so there was some truth to Floyd's story.]

King continued his plea: "Now Johnny this is the proposition—you have a bill of sale on Modoc and the elephant is your property. If the show goes out under my management of course you still own the elephant until I pay you back. If the show is sold we will give Christy, Buchannan and John Ringling a chance to bid on her. Johnny, here is what I am up against. When the show closed I did not have a five dollar bill. That \$150.00 you so kindly loaned me ran me for a while, then I had to borrow money from my mother, and I have borrowed all the cash she has. So Johnny, your old pal has no funds and I am here at this hotel and have to stay with the ship to see what happens. As I have borrowed from you about \$1050. I figure Johnny if you can help me with \$350. More it will see me through, enable me to pay my hotel bill and keep up a front until we find out what will happen. Of course I really believe the National Printing Co. will decide in a few weeks that the show can't be sold and will give me enough to get it out. However in the meantime I have to live. So Johnny you have had your troubles but you know I am on the level or else I would not have saved out Modoc and given you a bill of sale on her. I won't need this \$350.00 all at one time. But just enough to keep me going and a front up. So Johnny please wire me upon receipt \$150.00 if you will. I will try and make that run me two or three or four weeks, and maybe by that time everything will be set. The only thing I ask is in the event we have to sell Modoc that you will give me the difference between what she brings and what I owe you in cash plus the interest."⁸⁴

In mid-January, while trying to raise fresh funds, King went back to Pluto's financial well: "Friend Johnny—I put the enclosed ad in the Tribune last Sunday. I received several answers that looked favorable. Particularly one party in Rockford, Ill., who wants to get in the circus business. I was down to see him Wednesday. He is coming in here early next week, I am working on several angles, and

even if they should fall through with, I believe the National Printing Co., here will put up the dough to get the show out as they have sent about \$1250.00 to Brenham since we closed. They realize fully that everything would be rosier for me now, if Howard had not grabbed the dough and walked out, and that I am honorable enough to try and pay off his debts. I have got to get the show out somehow and can't afford to walk out on the proposition. So John I know you are hard pressed, but will you wire me \$150. more on 'Modoc.' I am sure this will see me through. I hate to call on you John, but I know you want me to get the show out, and I will if you will stick with me just a little while longer. If the worse should ever come, we should get a good price for Modoc and it would let you out. So John as much as I hate to ask you, will you please wire me \$150. I will make that last me three or four weeks and by that time things will have come to a head."

Regarding an earlier financial deal Floyd noted: "That fink Herb Duvall was here the early part of the week and tried to proposition me. But I know him too well. I simply told him that we were going to open the [?] part of March and that I was leaving for Texas in a week or two. I think what he wanted to do at Little Rock was to steal the show from the receiver or Mike Golden for about five grands—until you walked in and got the show."⁸⁵

Pluto was in New York on business and responded with a letter. The worried King wired right back: "New York Letter just received so understand why didn't hear from you. Stop. Sparks phoned Monday afternoon that if Downie didn't accept his proposition Tuesday or Wednesday he would come here and do business but don't think Sparks really wants to do business with anyone. Stop. I told Sparks I had borrowed twelve centuries on Modoc also owed you century or two on sleeping car. Johnnie be sure and wire what I asked for in letter. Stop. Looks like National will help get the show out."⁸⁶

On January 29 King wrote that he had just returned from Mugivan's funeral, where the church did turnaway business in spite of a foot of snow on the ground. The funeral assembly lacked any presence from the Ringling interests, or Zack Terrell. King wrote: "I received your wire upon my return here Saturday night. And yesterday I received your check for \$75.00. Well, Johnny you have positively saved my life and maybe my show. For this is the situation, all the time I have been playing the lone game of waiting to see if the National Printing Co., could sell the show as a single unit. It seems now they can't. I saw Mr. Hanks of the National this morning and he said 'Floyd, you should be down in Brenham, Texas getting the show ready to open.' And I really believe they will advance me enough now to get it out in order to protect the amount due them. I can't crowd them. If I ran away they would not try to save the show for me. What they want to do is to help me get back on my feet after Howard grabbed all the dough for years and left me with his debts to pay. . . . I understand Howard is in Europe and he left with \$126,000. But of course don't know. I have not heard from him since last Oct., and can't locate him anywhere."⁸⁷

On the bright side King added: "Got a wire from John Ringling a few days ago wanting to know about the steel cars with the Cole Bros. Show, which he wants. He also wants the elephants including Modoc. I wrote him I was just waiting to see what the National was going to do, if the show went piece meal, I could get the elephants and Modoc and the steel cars for him. So John it is just a position of waiting a little while I look for the printing company here to get busy with me any day now."⁸⁸

According to elephant historian Bob Cline, Big Modoc was a female Asian born in 1900. In 1904 she was bought by Leon Washburn, and used on the 1905-1906 Washburn and D'Alma Circus, 1907-1909 Washburn Animal Circus, 1910-

1916 Great Patterson Shows, 1917 Gollmar Bros. Circus, 1918-1922 Great Patterson Shows, 1923-1924 Gentry-Patterson Circus, 1925 Walter L. Main Circus, 1926-27 Gentry Bros. Circus, 1928 Walter L. Main Circus, 1929 Cole Bros. World Toured Circus, and 1929-1930 John Pluto.

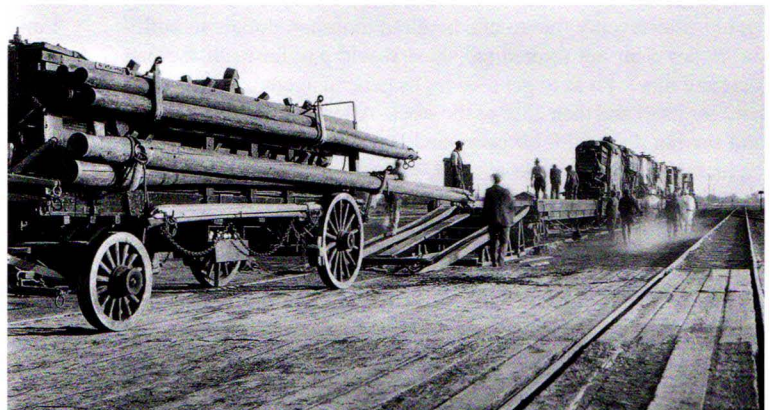
It was also reported that Jess Adkins purchased Modoc from the bankrupt 1930 Cole Bros. Circus and in 1931 sold her to Ringling-Barnum where she remained until her death in winter quarters early in 1957. The new documentation just presented suggests that Pluto purchased Modoc in 1929 from Floyd King when the Cole Bros. Circus had financial problems. In either case, John Ringling came to own Modoc, "the dancing elephant," in 1931 either from Pluto directly or through Adkins.

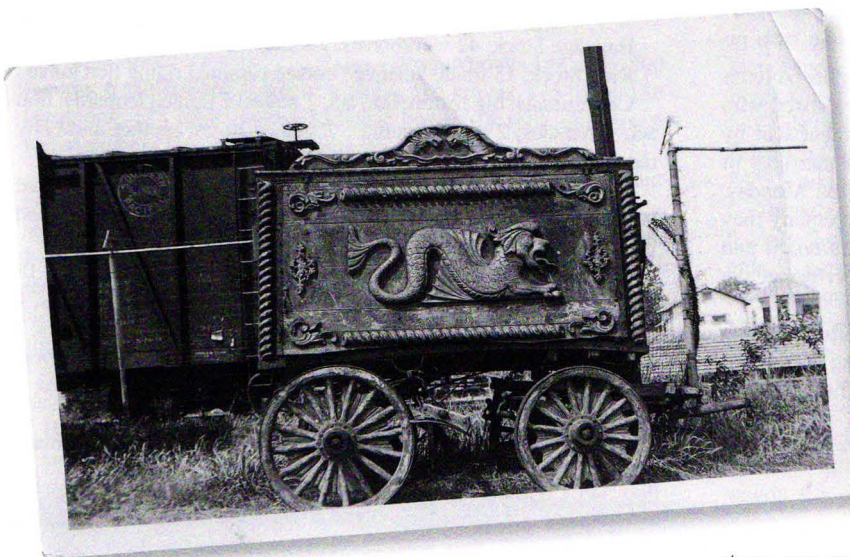
By the first week of February, Floyd King had met with Charles Sparks and was told that Howard King "had signed his equity in this show over to me [Sparks]." For a loan of \$8,000 or \$10,000 Sparks could get a first mortgage on the show, but he procrastinated. Floyd King thought Sparks really didn't want to buy any show. Pluto was then given the rest of the story: "Well, Johnny, I intend to do just what you said in your letter about incorporating the show. [Previously Pluto had incorporated the Golden Bros. Show and he was aware that the E. E. Coleman Circus was also incorporated as a way to sell stock and raise money.] I have just got one out and that is the National Printing Company. With what they have sent down there in cash to winter the show and with Howard's and my printing debts—they have due them \$23,000. They don't stand to get scarcely anything back unless they put the few thousand necessary to get the show on the road—in a position to take in money. And I am almost positive they will come across within the next several days . . . the show should open about March 29, and I think I will get some action this week. I will force the issue one way or the other soon—for in two or three weeks it would be too late to put on the show."⁸⁹

King reached out again for funds—at least \$75. He needed it to travel to Brenham. He wanted to leave soon and he hoped Pluto would attend to this right away. He also reminded Pluto that if "the show doesn't go out I will arrange to sell Modoc for you subject to your approval and attend to the details and go down there and ship her—if it comes to that."⁹⁰

A few days later, a desperate King asked Pluto for yet another \$75, promising that "in the future I guarantee I will be wiring some towards Baltimore. Johnny I have less than a \$2.00 bill, so please don't fail to wire me \$75.00 upon receipt, if you want to save a poor showman's life." King was also fighting a legal attachment linked to some Gentry Bros. labor claims. Neither of the King brothers lived nor had any property within the jurisdiction of the court, so the case

Cole Bros. pole wagon coming off the flat at Douglass, Arizona, April 9, 1930. Charles Puck photo, Pfening Archives.





After the Cole Bros. Circus closed the equipment ended up at George Christy's winter quarters in South Houston, Texas. A former Gollmar tableau wagon vegetates there. Pfening Archives.

was thrown out. But King could not get to winter quarters on what little he had in his pocket.⁹¹

A grateful King wrote on February 17: "[When] you mailed me the check for \$75.00 last week, you positively saved my life, as I was clean. . . . The National Printing & Engraving Co., here who have advanced me money to winter the show on, or rather who have sent it directly to winter quarters are going to help me get the show out. They will not put up more than they can possibly have to, so I will have to do it as cheaply as I can, and to tell the truth I never knew I could do things so cheap."⁹²

King had indeed learned to operate a circus on a shoestring. Soon he was known for being able to run a circus longer on "nothing" than any other owner.

Pluto did get some records of the winter quarters expenses in late March. Western Union telegrams with daily income amounts were sent to him after the show opened. These sheets also went to one of Pluto's contacts, a Mr. Shriver, vice president of the Marine National Bank in Baltimore. So Pluto was kept in the loop when the Cole Bros. Circus was in winter quarters, and the first few weeks of the 1930 season.⁹³

The 1930 Cole Bros. World Toured Circus opened March 29 at Uvalda, Texas, before crossing into New Mexico and then on to Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, and finally Kentucky. The last few days there were shrouded in financial difficulty. The July 7 date at Central City, Kentucky was lost due to money problems. Unable to move, the show closed at Scottsville, Kentucky on July 11. Eventually the train made it to Nashville where Bert Rutherford and H. C. Ingraham purchased it and shipped it to their winter quarters at Peoria, Illinois. The deal fell through, and the train moved to the Venice Transportation Company at East St. Louis, Illinois. Later George W. Christy purchased the equipment.

Final Activities

In addition to his interest in the 1930 Cole Bros. Circus, Pluto kept in contact with other owners. A letter from Charles Sparks on Downie Bros. Big 3 Rings Wild Animal Circus letterhead read, "Guess you will be a little surprised I had to take this show over at Susquehanna, Pa. Sept. 11, and believe you me I have been a

busy fellow." Sparks wanted Pluto to come over to the show and to bring his partner, for he had lots to tell about the troubles he went through. He enclosed a route card so Pluto could advise when he might be able to come on the lot. The show's route on the Eastern Shore of Maryland had been shortened, and Sparks wanted to be sure that Pluto could make a convenient date. Sparks also thanked Pluto for his kindness to Sparks and his wife when they visited Baltimore as "she got a big kick out of going to that night club her first experience."⁹⁴

Later, Pluto received a letter from R. M. Harvey, general agent on the 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show that referenced the brief conversation held on the Sells-Floto lot at Baltimore and "after recent developments, I am sure things are evolving in such a manner that a man of your

stamp can make a nice profit." Harvey wanted to meet with Pluto in Pittsburgh. "I am sure it would be to your advantage and possibly to my own if we can have an early conference—no action needed now except to do some preliminary planning and scheming and with my co-operation in the situation I am in, am confident something could be accomplished which might mean something big for you."⁹⁵ Just what Harvey had in mind we will never know, as no additional correspondence has survived.

In early 1935 the use of the Cole Bros. Circus title came under hot contention while Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell framed their new circus in Rochester, Indiana. Joseph Bradbury chronicled the show's history in the May-June 1965 *Bandwagon*. Floyd King, the show's general agent, arrived in winter quarters on Christmas Day 1934, and told the managers that the title Cole Bros. World Toured Circus had plenty of appeal. Terrell went to see a son-in-law of the late Martin Downs in Toronto about use of the title. The son-in-law, his wife, and another sister gave Terrell permission to use the Cole title.⁹⁶

When word of the new show's title became general knowledge, Pluto fired off a letter stating that the title belonged to him and warned the owners not to use it without his permission. Pluto insisted he had purchased the title from Elmer H. Jones. Late in life, however, Jones told Floyd King (who leased the Cole Bros. title from John Pluto in 1929 and 1930), a different story. King recalled Jones admitting he didn't exactly own the title but was not "going to let Pluto get out of Hot Springs [when Pluto purchased equipment from him in February 1926] with all that money so he 'threw in the title' in the deal." Pluto was said to have become convinced Adkins and Terrell had clear title to use the name, as no additional heat developed in 1935.⁹⁷ But more recent evidence reopens this can of worms. Some of Pluto's correspondence acquired by the author includes this receipt for the sale of the Cole Bros. title by Pluto to Adkins and Terrell in 1936: "In consideration of Seven Hundred Fifty (\$750.00) Dollars paid to me this date by Cole Bros.—Clyde Beatty Circus, Inc., The Indiana Circus Corporation, Jesse Adkins and Zack Terrell, individuals, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, I hereby release the above named corporations and individuals from any and all liabilities of any nature whatsoever for any and all claims referring to title, interest, or demands I have or may have in the title 'COLE BROS', or any other similar name for in connection with any circus or amusement enterprise."⁹⁸

Pluto's circus career ended like it started, with the Cole Bros. Circus. The title sale transaction brought down the curtain on John Pluto's investments in American circuses.

Personal Life

Little is known about the social side of John Pluta's life. A letter from his brother, Michael, was answered in 1925 by a sister, who signed it E. Pluta. And there's a wedding announcement sent by Mr. and Mrs. Albert Friedlander who announced the marriage of her sister Dorothy Landsman to Mr. John M. Pluta on Monday, December 29, 1930, in Washington D.C. After the ceremony they lived in Baltimore. The wedding made it into the *Billboard* and the only additional information is that a Rabbi Lobe performed the ceremony. John died in 1971; Dorothy, in 1988.

John Pluto's role in circus history is limited to a couple of boxes of correspondence. It mostly includes some interesting correspondence from Floyd King regarding the organization of the 1930 Cole Bros. Circus.

Sources:

While searching for route cards on eBay this author won an auction that included the circus papers of John Pluta. Later I discovered an additional box of Pluto's correspondence at the Circus World Museum. Joe Bradbury had already used this material when he wrote the history of the E. E. Coleman Circus. The route information came from the Ted Bowman Circus Route Collection. I would also like to thank Fred Dahlinger, Jr. for his helpful insights in putting together this paper, and Erin Foley of the Circus World Museum Library for being so helpful. **BW**

Appendix A: Inventory of the 1924 Golden Bros. Trained Wild Animal Show property:

Train: Car #2—Advance Car, 70 feet (tied up in Bristol, Tennessee); Car #70—flatcar, 60 feet; Car #71—flatcar, 66 feet; Car #72—flatcar, 60 feet; Car #73—flatcar, 60 feet; Car #74—flatcar, 54 feet; Car #75—flatcar, 60 feet; Car #76—flatcar, 60 feet; Car #51—coach (sleeper), 70 feet; Car #52—coach (sleeper), 70 feet; Car #53—coach (sleeper), 70 feet; Car #50—coach (privilege car), 70 feet; Car #60—stock car, 70 feet; Car #61—stock car, 70 feet; Car #62—stock car, 70 feet; Total flatcar length, 420 feet; Sleepers included 147 mattresses, 228 blankets, 174 pillowslips, 210 pillows, 207 sheets.

Train Equipment: 2 pinch bars, 1 snubbing rope (manila), 1 pull-over cable (steel), 12 ½- x 3- x 4½-inch steel plates, 3 Barrett Tracks jacks, 1 pair steel runs, 140 wagon chocks, 1 pull-up cable (steel), 1 Delco Light Plant complete.

Carpenters' Equipment: 2 claw hammers, 1 square, 1 hatchet, 1 five foot cross cut saw, 1 nail bar.

Privilege (Dining) Car Equipment: 1 steel range, 1 coffee urn, 3 bake pans, 2 fry pans, 48 enamel cups, 24 enamel bowls, 24 enamel plates, 9 dozen spoons, 5-dozen knives, 5-dozen forks, salt shakers and pepper shakers, cream pitchers, etc.

Wagons and Trucks: #67 Sideshow Canvas, 18 feet; #104 Office Wagon, 14 feet; #35 Light Plant, 15 feet; #93 Steam Calliope, 13 feet; #23 Pole Wagon, 23 feet; #94 Air Calliope, 11 feet; #75 Band Wagon, 16 feet; #74 January Wagon (clowns); #65 Commissary Wagon, 15 feet; #55 Cage Wagon, 12 feet; #47 Plank Wagon, 15 feet; #62 Cage Wagon, 12 feet; #23 Stringer Wagon, 24 feet; #51 Cage Wagon, 14 feet; #34 Plank Wagon, 14 feet; #50 Cage Wagon, 14 feet; #47 Blacksmith and Menagerie, 17 feet; #60 Cage Wagon, 14 feet; #44 Canvas Wagon, 14 feet; #72 Prop and Arena, 12 feet; #46 Trunk and Trappings, 16 feet; #30 Dog Wagon, 20 feet; #40 Wardrobe Wagon, 15 feet; #75 Ford Truck, 12 feet; #62 Water Wagon, 12 feet.

Hay Animals: 1 elephant named Rosey, 13 trained ponies, 1 elephant named Rubber, 2 bucking mules, 3 camels.

Baggage Stock: 42 workhorses, 2 saddle horses.

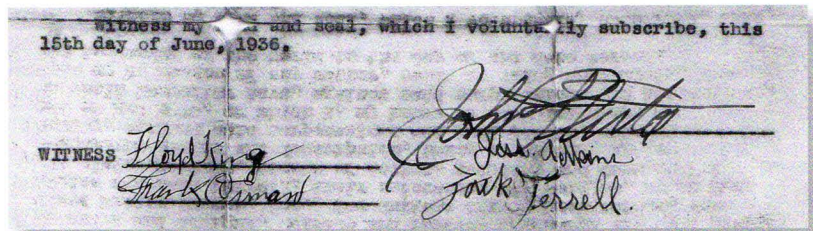
Ring Stock: 15 trained manège horses, 1 trained riding lion horse

Cat Animals: big feature lion act, 7 males; 2 trained leopards; lion act, 4 females; 2 trained pumas; 7 trained bears; mother and baby monkey.

Small Animals: 4 trained fox terriers, 6 trained goats, 5 trained collies, 6 trained monkeys, 2 trained spitzes, 18 pigeons, 1 trained poodle.

Trappings: 19 manège English riding saddles; 2 mule riggings, 18 manège bridles, 10 white covers with letter "G," 15 saddle pads, 4 riding dog pads, 1 side saddle, 1 set January harness, 6 martingales, 1 dozen currycombs, 12 sets pony trappings, 1 dozen brushes, 10 horse blankets, 2 pitchforks, 1 set tandem harness, 1 rake, 9 surcingles, 1 lion riding outfit, 2 posing harness.

Elephant and Camel Trappings: 1 elephant blanket, 3 camel blankets, 1 elephant harness, 2 headpieces.



Signature lines of document whereby Pluto sold the Cole Bros. title to Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell on June 15, 1936. Ironically, the two witnesses were Floyd King, who had previously leased the Cole title, and Frank Orman, Cole executive, whose final troupings was with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus in the 1960s. John Polacsek collection.

Baggage Stock Harness: 42 sets baggage stock harness, 34 collars.

Canvas: 1 hundred-foot round top, 3 forty-foot middle pieces, 4 thirty-six-foot center poles, 24 twenty-two-foot quarter poles, 62 twelve-foot side poles, 124 stakes, 150 extra stakes, 2 stake pullers.

Seats: 16 lengths grand, 9-foot high; 30 lengths blues, 12-foot high.

Stake and Chain Tools: 6 adzes, 2 hand axes, 15 sledgehammers, 2 saws, 2 shovels.

Animal or Menagerie Top: 1 seventy-foot round top, 3 thirty-foot center poles, 2 forty-foot middle pieces, 46 twelve-foot side poles, rigging for same, 16 eighteen-foot poles, 1 thirty x thirty-foot marquee 12 twelve-foot poles, 3 eighteen-foot poles, 12 3½-inch steel posts, 94 stakes.

Sideshow Top: 1 sixty-foot round top, 3 twenty-eight-foot poles, 2 thirty-foot middle pieces, 36 ten-foot poles, rigging for same, 8 fourteen-foot poles, 1 ten- x twelve-foot marquee, 64 stakes, 2 fifteen- foot poles, 3 posts—steel and chain, 72 stakes.

Banner Line Front: 15 pictorial banners, 11 twenty-two-foot banner poles, 28 stakes, rigging for same, 1 stake puller.

Horse Top: 1 forty- x seventy-foot square tent, 6 fourteen-foot center poles, 20 six-foot side poles, 5 eight-horse mangers.

Cook House Top: 1 thirty-foot round top, 1 twenty-foot middle piece, 26 nine-foot side poles, 2 fourteen-foot center poles, sixteen- x twenty-foot kitchen, 42 stakes.

Pad Room Top: 1 thirty-foot round top, 2 thirty-foot middle pieces, 1 twenty-foot middle piece, 6 sixteen-foot center poles, 36 stakes, 3 eight-horse mangers (canvas).

Cook House Equipment: 2 steel ranges, 2 large ladles, 1 kitchen table, 6 large spoons, 2 large forks, 1 meat grinder, 2 large kitchen boxes, 1 cleaver, 1 meat saw, 3 paring knives, 1 egg whip, 4 fire kettles, 1 kettle, 6 drip pans, 12 milk pans, 1 wash boiler, 1 pot

scraper, 4 stockpots, 2 stove lifters, 2 large dippers, 2 frying pans, 1 coal shovel.

Dining Room Utensils: 216 plates, 159 soup bowls, 148 cups, 300 saucers, 6 saltshakers, 6 pepper shakers, 185 knives, 175 forks, 150 teaspoons, 128 tablespoons, 25 sugar bowls, 16 milk pitchers, 6 water pitchers, 1 coffee can, 1 sugar can.

Big Show Props: 1 dog pedestal, 11 horse pedestals, 2 elephant tubs, 1 dog seat, 4 medium pedestals, 4 small pedestals, 2 diving ladders, 6 lion pedestals, 1 very small pedestal, 5 buckets, 2 hoops, 1 short ladder, 1 high ladder, 1 arena net, 15 sections steel arena, 7 sections chutes, 3 panels each section, 10 hook seats, 1 tightrope, block and tackle for same, legs for tightrope, 2 hurdles, 1 chair, 4 hoops, 34 ring posts, 2 ring curtains, 2 ring ropes.

Sideshow Props: 10 stages complete, 2 ticket seller stands, 1 canvas sidewalk, 2 hopscotch ticket stands.

Blacksmith Shop: 1 anvil, 1 portable forge, 1 vise, 1 whetstone, 1 emery wheel, 1 set dyes stock and dyes, 2 sledgehammers, 12 swages, 1 blacksmith shovel, 2 claw hammers, 5 saws, 2 pair bolt cutters, 2 riveting hammers, 2 rasps, 1 brace and 3-dozen bits, 1 square, 1 level, 1 T-square, 12 tongs, 1 hand ax.

Candy Stand: 11 jacks, 7 counter boards, 3 juice cans, 5 buckets, 35 glasses, 12 white jackets, 6 ice cream dippers, 3 stock boxes, 3 boxes sanitary drink cups, 10,000 peanut bags.

Wardrobe: 1 full and complete set wardrobe for spectacular productions, Cinderella in Jungle Land, 1 full and complete set wardrobe for parade.

Light Plant: 1 twenty-four- x sixteen-foot switchboard complete, 1 15-KW 110 V DC gasoline driven generator set complete, 1 15-KW 110 V DC gasoline driven generator set complete, 1 rheostat, 4 wire reels, 700 foot wire, 1 large searchlight, 3 large reflectors, 5 small reflectors, 3 iron chests, electric light globes.

Office Equipment: 1 adding machine, 1 typewriter, 300 newspaper cuts.

Note: The wild and domesticated animals enumerated in the above inventory from elephants to the most insignificant animal, including leopards and pumas, are trained for the circus and show purposes and are worth considerable in excess of their intrinsic value for show purposes⁹⁹

Appendix B: Inventory of the 1925 Gentry Bros. show purchased at Paola, Kansas:

Wagons and Cages: Cook House wagon #35, 13 feet; Cook House Wagon #36, 16 feet; Chandelier Wagon #19, 14 feet; Sideshow Wagon #20, 15 feet; Stringer Wagon #40, 25 feet; Plank Wagon #16, 14 feet; Candy Wagon #13, 14 feet; Clown Bandwagon #33, 15 feet; Stake and Chain Wagon #14, 14 feet; Pole Wagon #62, 26 feet; Property Wagon #24, 17 feet; Jack Wagon #18, 17 feet; Wardrobe Wagon # 22, 17 feet; Plank Wagon #39, 14 feet; Bird Wagon #1, 10 feet; Air Calliope Wagon #15, 11 feet; Steam Calliope Wagon #42, 13 feet; Stable Wagon #26, 15 feet; Stake Driver Wagon; Canvas Wagon #12, 15 feet; Band Wagon #11, 16 feet; Menagerie Wagon #41, 14 feet; 1 Stake Puller; Cage Wagon #2, 10 feet; Cage Wagon #3, 10 feet; Cage Wagon #4, 10 feet; Cage Wagon #5, 10 feet; Cage Wagon #6, 10 feet; Cage Wagon #7, 10 feet; Cage Wagon #8, 10 feet; Cage Wagon #9, 10 feet; Ticket Wagon #43, 14 feet; Dog Wagon #45, 14 feet; Water wagon #29, 11 feet; Police Wagon; January Wagon; Collie Dog Parade Wagon # 10; High Jumping Gray Hound Wagon; Ford truck; 2 bird cages in training shed.

Railroad Equipment: Flat Car #32 (loading car), 70 feet 4 inches; Flat Car #34 (steel), 70 feet 4 inches; Flat Car #38, 70 feet 4 inches; Flat Car #30, 70 feet 4 inches; Flat Car #36, 70 feet 4 inches; Flat

Car #40 (wooden), 70 feet 4 inches; Bull Car #22, 59 feet 8 inches in side; door off hangers, siding in fair shape; Stock Car #26, 59 feet 2 inches inside—for baggage horses; flooring in bad shape; Stock Car #24, 59 feet 2 inches inside—for baggage horses; three box lids missing; Ring Stock and Ponies Car #28, 64 feet inside; Advance Car #2; Private Car #41; Sleeper Car #42; Privilege Car #43; Working Men's Car #44.

Animals and Birds: 8 pigeons, 17 parrots, 16 monkeys, 24 dogs, 6 goats, 2 elk, 1 pig, 3 elephants, 3 camels, 1 tiger, 2 lions, 2 leopards, 1 puma, 2 bears, 2 big monkeys, 26 ponies, 2 mules, 10 manège horses, 5 fillies, 2 bareback horses, 56 baggage stock, 2 saddle horses, 48 baggage stock harness sets in shed and 2 baggage harness sets being used around farm.

Loading Order of Flat Cars: Wooden Flat #1—steam calliope + 7 turn cages + candy wagon; Flat #2—big cook house + cook house + stable wagon + menagerie canvas + stake driver + police wagon; Flat #3—little sideshow + ticket wagon + 2 turn cages +sideshow wagon + dog wagon; Flat #4—trunk wagon + plank wagon +property wagon #24 + stringer wagon +January wagon; Flat #5—plank wagon + back door wagon #20 + air calliope + jack wagon + chandelier wagon; Flat #6—pole wagon + Ford car + water wagon + canvas wagon + stake and chain wagon.¹⁰⁰

Footnotes

1. Joseph Bradbury, "E.E. Coleman's Circus," *Bandwagon*, January-February 1999 p. 24.
2. *Billboard*, July 7, 1917, p. 28.
3. A. W. Brouillet to Michael Golden July 17, 1923, John Pluto Papers, Circus World Museum Collection, hereafter cited as CWM.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Billboard*, March 29, 1924, p. 72.
6. Telegram from Herbert Duval to John Pluto, May 16, 1924, CWM.
7. Telegram from John Pluto to J. Charles Fried, May 29, 1924, CWM.
8. Telegram from John Pluto to Walter O. Lindsey, June 7, 1924, CWM.
9. Golden Bros. Stock Certificate, CWM.
10. Telegram from Thomas Shriver to Rodgers, Barber & Henry Attorneys, June 20, 1924, CWM.
11. Telegram from John Pluto to Golden Bros. Circus, June 29, 1924, CWM.
12. Invoice from Riverside Printing Company to Golden Bros. Circus, September 4, 1924, CWM.
13. Dan France to Mike Golden, June 12, 1924, CWM.
14. Michael Golden Employment contract n.d., CWM.
15. Dan France to Mike Golden, June 12, 1924, CWM.
16. Telegram from Dan France to John Pluto, June 22, 1924, CWM.
17. Telegram from Frank Bottum to Dan France, July 4, 1924, CWM.
18. Telegram from Dan France to Manager Golden Bros. Circus, July 15, 1924, CWM.
19. Dan France to John Pluto, July 7, 1924, CWM.
20. Dan France to John Pluto, July 7, 1924; telegram from Dan France to John Pluto, July 14, 1924, both CWM.
21. Telegram from John Pluto to Dan France, July 11, 1924, CWM.
22. Dan France to John Pluto, July 17, 1924, CWM.
23. Telegram from Dan France to John Pluto, July 24, 1924, CWM.
24. Telegram from Dan France to John Pluto, July 25, 1924, CWM.

25. Telegram from W. J. Daplyn to John Pluto, July 26, 1934, CWM.
26. Rogers, Barber & Henry Attorneys to John Pluto, August 6, 1924; August 6, 1924 telegram from John Jilson to Rogers, Barber & Henry Attorneys, August 6, 1934, CWM.
27. Telegram from A.C. Bradley to John Pluto, August 5, 1924, CWM.
28. Telegram from A. C. Bradley to John Pluto, August 15, 1924, CWM.
29. Telegram from Frank Van Miller to John Pluto, August 19, 1924, CWM.
30. Telegram from Frank Van Miller to John Pluto, August 24, 1924, CWM.
31. Telegram from Mike Golden to John Pluto, August 30, 1924, CWM.
32. Al. F. Wheeler to John Pluto, August 20, 1924, CWM.
33. Account sheet from Marion, North Carolina September 12, 1924, CWM.
34. *Billboard*, September 11, 1924, p. 24; September 18, 1924, p.27; December 20, 1924, p. 42.
35. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, August 31, 1924; telegram from L. T. Bradbury to John Pluto, September 11, 1924, CWM.
36. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, September 14, 1925, CWM.
37. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, September 18, 1925, CWM.
38. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto., September 21, 1925, CWM.
39. Floyd King to John Pluto, September 29, 1925, CWM.
40. Tom Parkinson, "Floyd King – A Reminiscence," *Bandwagon*, January-February 1997, p. 19.
41. Telegram from Mike Pluto to John Pluto, October 12, 1925; telegram from John Pluto to Globe Sales Company, October 19, 1925, CWM.
42. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, October 19, 1925, CWM.
43. Mike Pluto to John Pluto, January 11, 1926, CWM.
44. *Ibid.*
45. S. L. Cronin to John Pluto, no date, CWM.
46. Joseph Bradbury, "The Floyd & Howard King Railroad Circuses 1925-1930," *Bandwagon*, September-October 1977, p. 6.
47. L.T. Bradbury to John Pluto, February 16, 1926, CWM.
48. Bill of sale from E. H. Jones to John Pluto, February 15, 1926, CWM.
49. Statement from Erie Lithograph & Printing Company, March 1, 1926, CWM.
50. Statement from King Bros. to John Pluto, March 9, 1926, CWM.
51. Receipt, March 9, 1926; Mike Pluto to John Pluto, March 12, 1926, CWM.
52. J. H. Barry to John Pluto, March 11, 1926, CWM.
53. Lease from Michael Pluto to Floyd King, April 2, 1926; statement, August 16, 1927, CWM.
54. Floyd King to John Pluto, August 21, 1926, CWM.
55. Lease from Michael Pluto to George Barton, April 10, 1926, CWM.
56. Agreement between Michael Pluto and George Barton, April, 16, 1926, CWM.
57. George Lux to John Pluto, September 30, 1926, CWM.
58. Public Sale of Railroad Rolling Stock and Contents, February 20, 1928, CWM.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Lease from Michael Pluto to William Senning, April 13, 1926; William Senning to John Pluto, March 10, 1927, CWM.
61. George W. Christy to John Pluto, October 20, 1926, CWM.
62. Telegram from George W. Christy to John Pluto, December 20, 1926, CWM.
63. Charles T Hunt Sr., *The Story of Mr. Circus*, The Record Press, Rochester, New Hampshire, pp. 195-197.
64. Andrew Downie to John Pluto, March 5, 1927, CWM.
65. Telegram from Jake Friedman to John Pluto, March 6, 1927, CWM.
66. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, April 6, 1927; telegram from John Pluto to Floyd King, no date, CWM.
67. Tom Parkinson, "Circusdom Historical Personage," *Bandwagon*, May-June 1966, p. 8.
68. Floyd King to John Pluto, February 3, 1929, CWM.
69. Floyd King to John Pluto, March 3, 1929; telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, May 4, 1929, CWM.
70. Walter L. Main to John Pluto, May 3, 1929; telegram from Walter L. Main to John Pluto, May 4, 1929, CWM.
71. Telegram from John Pluto to Walter L. Main, April 27, 1929, CWM.
72. Telegram from Walter L. Main to John Pluto, May 6, 1929, CWM.
73. John Pluto to Walter L. Main, May 11, 1929, CWM.
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*
76. John Pluto to H. H. Niemeyer, June 4, 1929, CWM.
77. Charles T. Hunt to John Pluto, June 13, 1929, CWM.
78. John Pluto to Charles T. Hunt, June 13, 1929; telegram from John Pluto to William Ketrow, June 13, 1929, CWM.
79. Telegram from Mike Pluto to John Pluto, July 18, 1929, Author's collection, hereafter cited as JFP.
80. Bill of sale from John Robinson Shows to John Pluto, July 30, 1929, CWM.
81. Jack La Blair to Sam Dill, no date, JFP.
82. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, no date, JFP.
83. Floyd King to John Pluto, no date, CWM.
84. Floyd King to John Pluto, January 3, 1930, CWM.
85. Floyd King to John Pluto, January 16, 1930, CWM.
86. Telegram from Floyd King to John Pluto, January 21, 1930, CWM.
87. Floyd King to John Pluto, January 29, 1930, CWM.
88. *Ibid.*
89. *Ibid.*
90. *Ibid.*
91. Floyd King to John Pluto, February 9, 1930, CWM.
92. Floyd King to John Pluto, February 17, 1930, CWM.
93. Telegrams from Floyd King to John Pluto, March and April 1930, CWM.
94. Charles Sparks to John Pluto, September 21, 1930, JFP.
95. R. M. Harvey to John Pluto, September 12, 1930, JFP.
96. Joseph Bradbury, "A History of the Cole Bros. Circus 1935-1940," *Bandwagon*, May-June 1965 p.10.
97. *Ibid.*
98. Agreement between John Pluto and Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell, June 15, 1936, JFP.
99. *CWM, June 18, 1924* Golden Bros. Inventory, June 18, 1924, CWM.
100. Gentry Bros. Inventory , September 25, 1925, CWM.

"CUTTING UP OLD CIRCUS MONEY"

by Harry Barnet



John F. Robinson, son of the founder of the Robinson circus dynasty, about 1899. Pfening Archives.

Early in 1921 reporter Harry Barnet interviewed John F. Robinson, son of the original John Robinson. The Governor, as he was often called, was born on the Robinson and Foster Circus in 1843. He debuted as an equestrian in 1845, continuing as a rider through the 1860 season. In 1861, at the tender age of sixteen, he had the title of Doorkeeper, a position often held by a trustworthy family member. In 1863 he was in the Union Navy. Returning to the family circus in 1864 he was second in command to his father. Starting in 1865 he was in charge of the entire show, his father dropping off the roster after 1864. Beginning in 1872 he was listed as the owner of the show. His reign lasted until January 1909 when he conveyed ownership of the circus to his son, John G. Robinson. The show did not tour after the 1911 season. In March 1916, John G. sold the title and equipment to Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers.

John F. ran the John Robinson Circus for approximately forty-four years. He was a contemporary of W. W. Cole, James A. Bailey, the Sells brothers, John B. Doris, W. C. Coup and Ben Wallace. Perhaps because he is the only second generation showman among his colleagues, he doesn't enjoy the exalted reputation of his peers. After all, starting a business is more difficult than maintaining an existing one. His name doesn't come up when distinguished circus managers are discussed.

This does him a disservice. Running any enterprise for forty-four years is a noteworthy achievement, and quite extraordinary in an industry with such a high mortality rate as field shows. This alone qualifies him for inclusion in the pantheon of notable circus managers. That he was a pioneer in railroad circusing, often took his

show to frontier areas, was technically innovative, and built one of the best brand names in circus history further supports the contention that he was one of the all-time greats.

These interviews may rehabilitate his standing among the celebrated outdoor impresarios. These articles are full of fascinating insights and observations from a veteran of seventy seasons. While some of his assertions need verification from additional sources, and others are flat wrong, overall, these pieces pulse with wisdom.

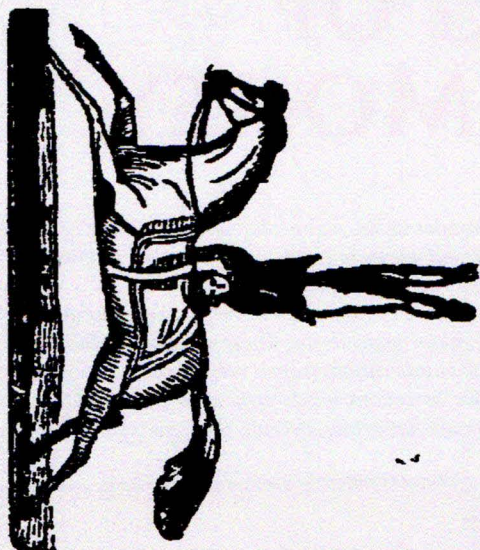


Old John Robinson, who began his career as a circus owner in 1842. This photo was taken not long before his death in 1888. Pfening Archives.

The interviews were Robinson's last public act before his death at age 77 on April 30, 1921, two weeks before the final installment was published.

These articles were published Dearborn Independent in seven installments from March 12 to May 28, 1921. The following article contains Parts I and II of the series, appearing in the issues of March 12, and March 19. The remaining five pieces will appear in the next two issues of Bandwagon.

As an aside, the Dearborn Independent, owned by auto magnate Henry Ford, was notorious for its anti-Semitic viewpoint, even running The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a scurrilous forgery purported to be a secret plan for the Jewish take-over of the world.



NATIONAL CIRCUS COMPANY.

Under the Management of Messrs. ROBINSON and FOSTER.

Equestrian Manager, Mr. S. P. STICKNEY, the great American Rider.

THE Managers respectfully inform the public that their new and extensive Arena will open at Columbus on Monday, May 30th, Tuesday 31st, and Wednesday, June 1st, three days only, with an Equestrian Company of unrivalled talent. The Costume, the Banners, Properties, Decorations, and the whole Paraphernalia is new and of the most splendid description. Novelty of every class will be introduced and performed in the most unique style.—The infant Roscius, the celebrated Master Juan Hernandez, now justly called the WONDER OF THE WORLD, is attached to the establishment, and will contribute with his daring feats to enliven the evenings' entertainment. This Child's wonderful performance must be seen to be believed.

For particulars of performances see bills and future advertisements

Columbus, May 24, 1842.

Old John's first show was the National Circus Company in which he partnered with clown Joseph Foster. Ad from *Ohio Statesman*, Columbus, Ohio, May 25, 1842.

Lest one dismiss the power of ideas, consider that Ford's crackpot paranoia was embraced by Adolf Hitler who went so far as to quote the magazine in Mein Kampf. After the war, two defendants at the trial of Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg cited articles in the Independent as major influences in the development of their anti-Semitism.

In 1927 Ford renounced the ideology of his magazine, calling The Protocols "gross forgeries," and asking "Jews as fellow men and brothers" to forgive him. While cynics suggested falling car sales led to his change of heart, he shut down the Independent in December 1927 and later prohibited right-wing nut groups from reprinting articles from the book. Fred D. Pfening III

I. Pioneer "Rolling Shows"

"While I wasn't exactly born under circus canvas, I didn't miss it very far," said Governor John F. Robinson one evening late in the summer, when we sat beneath age-old trees that make shade-shad-

owland of the immense lawn about the family home at the Terrace Park winter quarters of his former circus near Cincinnati.

"Three hours after mother rode her horse in the ring of Pa's circus," he continued, "I was born in a tavern room overlooking the canvas. That happened in Linden, Marengo County, Alabama, on the 4th day of November, 1843. Eighteen months later I made my debut as a circus performer.

"Of course, I don't remember that debut," the Governor went on, "but Pa used to tell me about it, and he laughed every time he told me.

"He was one of the very few four-horse equestrians in the world, and he had half a dozen acts. One of them was 'The Courier from St. Petersburg.' When Pa came into the ring, there was a lot of funny business between the ringmaster, the clown and the courier. Pa was the courier, and when this funny business was over he was given a mail sack to carry to its destination. It was a big valentine envelope kind of an affair, and I was dressed as Cupid, and hidden among a lot of old papers on the inside of it. I was frightened to death every time they put me into that sack, and shut the end of it.

"Well, Pa started off, riding one, two, three, and finally four horses at the same time. When he was riding the four of them, he pulled me out of the envelope, and every time he changed his position he shifted me into a different pose to represent famous statuary.

"Pa said that on the night of my first appearance I was cold—it was a bad night, and I had nothing on but a pair of tights that mother had made me from some kind of thin material—and the papers in the bag made such a warm nest that I went to sleep in spite of the fact that I was badly scared. I never knew when they carried me into the ring to play Cupid.

"And I never woke up when Pa pulled me out of the bag, and tried to posture me. I was as limp as a rag, and he could do nothing with me. The more he twisted and jerked me the harder I slept. Finally, he pulled me in front of his face, so the audience couldn't see what he was doing, and he gave me a terrible bite in the thigh. That woke me in a hurry, and as soon as I knew what was going on I stiffened, and the act went off all right.

"That was the beginning of seventy years," the Governor concluded, "in which I never knew any other kind of a life than that of a circus performer and owner, except for the time I served as an officer in the Federal Navy during the Civil War."

Thus did the Governor preface this series of what could just as well be captioned "three-in-one interviews" as anything else. He terms these conversations "cutting up old circus money." He means to say that he delved into his memory, and brought out of it to me tales of the doings of tent show folks and creatures who made a strange world among us—a place under the sun that as far as Americans generally are concerned always has been shut in by a shimmery curtain of mystery.

For the real history of the American circus is unwritten. It is true that outsiders have glimpsed some of the romantic and fascinating phases of the institution. But they never got at the true inwardness of things. That record has been handed down only by word of mouth from generation to generation of the Vagabonds of the Red Wagons. And it never strayed away from them to the rest of us, because circus people are a set to themselves. They have their own ways of thinking and doing, and even a language that is distinctively their own. They never have had much to say to anyone who is not of their breed.

Therefore, first of all, what the Governor does in these interviews is to scatter broadcast some of the how and the why of the circus as an American institution. And while he is doing this, he also is turning loose a close-up of the everyday lives of our forefathers, what they

thought, and what they did—whether they lived in New England, or nested in the heart of the romance land that is Louisiana; and whether they were of the hordes who made their way far in the direction of the crimson lair of the evening sun or whether they were of the other hordes who stopped mid-continent during the era of our national expansion from the Atlantic toward the West. All of this was gone over without a bit of “yarning,” because straightforwardness is as natural to the Governor as the swallowing of food when he is hungry.

The third angle is injected into these interviews by the man himself. Stripped of the press agent glory that surrounds circus owners, John F. Robinson is the most conspicuous natural figure in the tent show world. No other noted circus owner was “born in the business.” No other man ever occupied a similar position in the history of canvas-sheltered amusements. And his is the only family in which for three generations a son took over the management of circus affairs where the father laid them down. More than a century ago his father, John the First, launched the enterprise. When he became weary, the Governor assumed the ownership of the aggregation. It then was the largest circus in the world, though it was but a motley group of scraggly wagons and uncouth entertainers. For fifty years he led his caravans into the penetralia of every sort of people to be found between the two oceans, and betwixt the tromboning waves of the Gulf and the Canadian border.

That is how he received his title of Governor by which he is known in every place where his circus could display its gorgeousness during the years when the nation grew like a lusty weed in black loam; he was the ruler of a sizeable wandering community.

And while he was doing this, the Robinson family and their show became so tangled in the traditions of political parties, of fine old Southern families, of little settlements, and of just plain places along the roads like Chicago and Birmingham, that afterward

The Robinson and Foster Circus played New Orleans from December 25, 1843 to April 18, 1844. This ad is from the *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, January 18, 1844.

became great cities, that they're homefolks wherever they happen to “light.”

“I don't believe there is a place in the United States that I'm not personally known,” the Governor said, after a pause to light his cigar.

“That question came up one time when the show was in California,” he went on. “I came back here to winter quarters to spend a couple of weeks, and on my way to rejoin the show the subject of being universally known arose in conversation in the smoking room of the Pullman. I made the same statement there that I've just made to you.

“Later in the day, the train stopped on the prairie at a place where there was nothing but a sidetrack, and a section house where the trackmen kept their hand car—there were no other houses around that I could see. We drew into the siding to let another train pass us.

“While we were waiting for it to come, all of us in the Pullman got off to stretch our legs.

“‘Robinson,’ one of the passengers said as he looked around, ‘here's a place where you won't find anybody who knows you.’

“‘Yes, I guess that's so,’ I replied, because it didn't look to me as if I would. There was nobody there.

“In a few minutes the eastbound train came along, and it stopped with a Pullman exactly opposite me. On the platform was a Negro porter who was the porter on my private car with the show the season before.

“‘Hello, Governor,’ he yelled to me, ‘How's you all, and where's your circus?’

“So even out there in that forsaken place on the prairie I came across someone who knew me.”

In turn, the Governor passed the circus into the control of his son, John the Third, and not long ago it sang its swan song. The motion picture industry claimed the energies of his son, and of the

POSITIVELY FOR THREE DAYS ONLY!

NATIONAL CIRCUS, FROM NEW ORLEANS.



ROBINSON & ELDRED, MANAGERS.

THIS majestic establishment is to display its vast capabilities to the inhabitants of Augusta and vicinity, on the evenings of **WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, October 22d, 23d, and 24th, 1845,** under their enormous Pavilion, to be erected on A. Wilson's Lot, corner of Green and Jackson-streets.

Mons. LEE is famed for his Cannon Ball Feats, and for his mighty strength with which he resists the united power of any pair of horses. Master JUAN HERNANDEZ, the Pet of the Arena and wonder of the world, in a principal act of Horsemanship, on his favorite mare Ellen Tree. He is famous for his somersets forward and backward, which has never been completed by any one but himself.

With a company of other EQUESTRIANS of acknowledged talents and respectability, and unsurpassed by any other in the United States:

The managers therefore trust by giving a variety of entertainments, both amusing and instructing, to merit and receive that share of patronage bestowed on them in most of the principal cities and towns throughout the Southern country.

For particulars see small bills.

Doors open at half-past six o'clock—performance to commence at seven o'clock, P. M. Admittance fifty cents—children under 15 years of age half price. o16

Starting in 1845 Old John Robinson partnered with Gilbert Eldred. Ad from *Augusta (Georgia) Chronicle*, October 22, 1845.

NATIONAL AMPHITHEATRE. (Corner of Poydras and Baronne Streets.)

Messrs. ROBINSON & FOSTER PROPRIETORS.

Attraction extraordinary!—The **BENEFIT** of the **IOWA INDIAN CHIEFS AND BRAVES**, and the last night of their engagement.—Two new Indian Dances, the “Discovery” and “Bear Dance.” Exciting and novel Acts in the Circle, by the Champion of the Arena.—**Rockwood** will again be performing.—Equestrianism, Singing, Dancing, Juggling, Vaulting and Grand Stage Performances on the same evening.

THURSDAY, January 18th, 1844.

The performances will commence with an Equestrian Cavalcade called “Freedom's Sons.”—La Petite Carline in a Grand Pas Seul.—Mr T. McCollum in his wonderful Act on Two Horses.—Mr E Stone as the Delph Spinner.—The Enchanted Sack, by Master C Foster.—The wonderful Horse Champion will exhibit his astonishing feats.—Extraordinary Break-downs and Negro Extravaganzas, by the inimitable Chesnut, Walters, Worrel, Kelly, &c.—Mr E Stone, the renowned champion of Equestrianism, in his Act of Real Horsemanship, without saddle or bridle.—To conclude with the grand dramatic spectacle of **ROCKWOOD**.—Or, *The Life and Death of Dick Turpin, the Highwayman, and his bonny Black Ass.*

For particulars see bills.

In answer to numerous applications at the office, the Managers respectfully announce the revival of the Grand Drama of **MAZEPPA**. It will speedily be brought forward, in a style of magnificence exceeding its former production.

The doors will be opened for the evening at a quarter past 6 o'clock, and the performance will commence at 7 o'clock, precisely.

ROBINSON & ELDRED'S



Great National Circus Company,

COMPOSED OF OVER 150 MEN AND HORSES!!

The largest Equestrian Corps in the United States!!

THE citizens of Athens and surrounding country are respectfully informed that this establishment will exhibit
In Athens, on Thursday and Friday,
October 28th and 29th.

FOR TWO DAYS ONLY. Admission

Doors open at 2 and 7 o'clock, P. M.—Admittance

50 cents, Children and Servants half-price.

The proprietors have the pleasure of announcing to their friends and patrons of the South, that they are direct from the city of New York, and preparatory to spending the Winter in the Southern cities, they bring with them a combination of Equestrian talent, both male and female, that far surpasses anything of the kind that has ever travelled through the United States!

The Grand and effective display made by the Band seated in their costly chariot drawn by TWELVE BEAUTIFUL CREAM COLORED HORSES, the noblest of their kind!! driven twelve in hand by Mr. James Caruthers of Philadelphia, cannot fail to inspire every beholder with admiration and astonishment.

The different performances, together with scenery, dresses, properties and insignia would require four columns to do them justice, therefore we refer our readers to descriptive pamphlets for further particulars.

Particular attention paid to the accommodation of Ladies and Children.

From this company will pass through Madison, Easton, Milledgeville, Sparta, Warrenton, Applington and Augusta, en route for Charleston, S. C.

J. R. ROBINSON, } Proprietors.
G. N. ELDRED, }
Wm. R. LOUNT, Agent.

Oct. 21—33—11.

In 1847 the Robinson and Eldred show used the title Great National Circus Company. Band chariot in ad's text may be wagon shown later in this article. Ad from the *Southern Banner*, Athens, Georgia, October 21, 1847.

Ad from the *Southern Banner*, Athens, Georgia, October 21, 1847.

"A man who never has been through the experience," the Governor said as a preliminary to how all of this came about, "has no realization of what it meant to travel by wagons over the country when I was a boy, and up to 1870, when I put the show on the railroads. Even the smallest towns were great distances apart, and half of the time there were no roads. We had to send a pilot wagon with half a dozen men in it to make a road for the other wagons. The performers rode horseback or in buggies, and sometimes it took us a night and a day to get from one place to another. Then we ate and slept in the woods.

"In the towns we went to taverns, but they weren't very much better than the woods. They never had more than two or three bedrooms. The women slept in one of them, and the men in the others. Instead of having beds for us to sleep on, the tavern keepers threw straw on the floors, covered it with muslin, and we furnished our own pillows. About all that we had to eat was salt pork, swimming in its own grease, and corn bread. At that time there was plenty of game in the woods, but we never got it cooked at the taverns. And the coffee! Mostly made of parched corn, and sometimes of parched barley.

"We had an awful time with the wagons. They always were getting hopelessly stuck in the mud. Then we would throw everything out of them, and abandon the stuff. It was a common thing to abandon

greater number of the wild beasts with the show. There no longer is a Robinson circus.

But during the hundred years that the Robinsons in succession carried their show over the highlands, and through the brooding forests; across the quivering swamps, and the solid surfaces of a country that had an appearance none of us ever will know except through hearsay, they devised one piece of circus paraphernalia after another as the necessity for it arose. Other circus owners adopted these improvements as they were

made, and successfully tried out, until, in a large measure,

if the equipment and methods of the modern circus

are not exactly a Robinson idea, they at least have the Robinson base.

don the tent poles, because we always could cut more of them on the edges of the towns.

"But there was one wagon that came through in spite of the mud or anything else. That was the ring curb wagon. The ring was formed then by a wooden curb, and it took one wagon and team to haul it. No matter what happened, or how deep that wagon got stuck, it was taken over the roads in one way or another.

"One night, however, down in the swamps of Florida in the late 40's, it got stuck for keeps. We couldn't budge it. Against all circus precedents we took the curb out, and left it in the woods. Next day when it came time to show, it looked for a while as if we would have to go back and get it. No performer felt that he could go on with his act without it, because it never had been done before.

"Well, Pa raved around for a while, then he sent to the general store for picks and shovels. He measured off the diameter of the ring, and built the first circus ring made by throwing up an embankment of earth. We always used the idea after that, and then other shows took it up. No doubt, it has saved many a nasty injury to performers, because if they fell against the wooden curb they were pretty sure to get hurt.

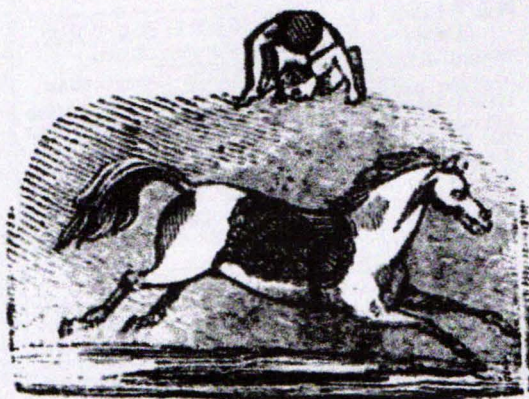
"And then the lighting arrangements were another thing we had to contend with. Pa used candles—all shows did then—and he kept it up for a good many years, until I was old enough to take a hand in affairs.

"We had frames with sconces in them, and we put the candles in the sconces. They caught the grease, and that grease made up the salary of the chandelier man—he collected it and sold it.

"There were a lot of nights during the season then when we didn't show. The places weren't big enough to make it pay to show

The Robinson and Eldred title lasted into the 1850s. This ad is from the *Columbus (Georgia) Enquirer* of December 18, 1849.

Robinson & Eldred's N. Y. Circus.



A NEW YEAR'S VISIT!

ROBINSON & ELDRED beg to announce that they will have the honor of appearing at Columbus, on the 2d, 3d and 4th days of January next. They take this opportunity of tendering to the citizens of this place and vicinity their warmest acknowledgements for the liberal patronage bestowed upon them during their former visit, and pledge themselves at all times when they may have the honor to appear in Columbus, to use their most strenuous efforts to please.

Admission, 50 cts.—children and colored persons, 25 cts. Particulars, see small bills.

Dec. 14, 1849.

51 2t

only in the afternoon, and some of the wagons would always be delayed. Generally the chandelier wagon was one of them, because it was the last to leave the lot, and the last to arrive in the next town, because the other wagons were more important.

"One night, down in Mississippi, when we were late in getting into the settlement, Pa used his ingenuity. The first of the baggage wagons didn't get there until dark, but the crowd was waiting for us, and Pa didn't have time to get the tent up. So he took the side canvas, and ran it around from one tree to another.

"Half of the show wasn't there when it came time to open the doors. One of the delayed wagons held the chandeliers. In laying out the ring there were so many fat pine stumps on the lot that Pa laid it out so that the ring bank would hit a stump here and there. When we opened the doors there wasn't any light, so Pa set fire to the stumps inside of the enclosure, and built fires on the tops of the stumps inside of the ring. But with all of that fire it was so dark that when I rode my horse Pa would have to tell me when I had to jump over the banners. I couldn't see them. I was a very, very small boy then, but I never have heard of anything so crude being used to light a circus."

Interviews with the Governor are bound to be rambling affairs. One incident suggests another to him, and sometimes the second event occurred years after the first. And sometimes the connection isn't always clear to anyone else. For that reason he provides a variety of narratives that, with his somewhat southern drawl and slurring of his "r's" gives unusual charm to what he has to say.

"I guess there are a lot of grandmothers down in Louisiana this very evening who remember the night show I gave years later at Clinton, near Baton Rouge," he said, and chuckled.

"We were still traveling by wagon, and I was going to close the season the next day at Baton Rouge, and ship the show to Cincinnati by steamboat," he said.

"We hadn't been showing at night for a good while—only in the afternoon, because the places were too small. But Clinton had a female college. The young ladies couldn't attend the show in the afternoon, and I concluded to give a night performance for their special benefit—there was enough of them to make it pay.

"After supper the chandelier man came to me, and asked how I was going to light the canvas.

"Why, with lamps, of course," I told him. Some years before that we were the first circus to abandon candles for coal oil illumination.

"The lamps ain't here," he said, "and I can't find them any place."

"Well, what did you do with them?" I asked him. "This is the first that I've heard of them being gone."

"They ain't in the wagon," he replied, "and I don't know where they are. I guess somebody forgot to bring them along, or else they throwed 'em out of the wagon to make it lighter to get through a mud hole."

"Well, I was in a fine fix then. All at once it struck me that I could use candles. So I told the men to get some narrow boards, about three or four inches wide and drive three or four nails in little circles all along the planks. Then we put some candles I bought in the town into those circles.

"A good many of the young ladies never had seen a circus before, nor a wild animal, and they looked forward to the evening's entertainment as quite a treat. They came to the show in a body.

"After they went through the menagerie tent, and started through the connection canvas into the Big Top, they stood still in amazement, looking at the illumination. I never felt so chagrined in my life, nor so elated, as I did when they commenced to praise it.

"Isn't it grand?" one girl would say to another.

"My, isn't it splendid!" she answered.

"I wouldn't have believed it to be possible," they would say, and they were in earnest about it as they walked up the seats.

"All the time those greasy candles would keep dropping out of the sockets I had made with the nails. But that wasn't so bad, and I didn't pay much attention to it, until the performance started. Then the grease dropping down spoiled the costumes of the performers, and all of them were ruined. I didn't attempt to show in Baton Rouge on account of it. But I always felt pleased that I showed that one night, even if the performers did lose their costumes—I was riding then, also, and mine was ruined with the rest of them—for those girls never had seen anything like it, and they really thought it was a grand illumination.

"Of course," the Governor continued, his recollection bestirred and alert, "there always was some fun attached to being a showman in those days. About the funniest thing I remember happened when my brother Gil tried to tie a knot in the tail of an old he-leopard shortly after this night, when we got home with the show and were putting it away for the winter.

"You know, an old he-leopard is the meanest thing that there is on the face of the earth. The one we had then was a meaner old spitfire than any one I ever owned, and when it came time to shift him from his traveling cage to his stationary one in winter quarters we didn't notice that the floor of one of the cages was about a foot higher than the other one. So we opened the door—the cages were backed rear end to rear end—and the leopard went in as nice as you please.

"Then I glanced around, and as I did so I felt something brush against my legs. Pa was standing alongside of one hind wheel of the traveling cage, and I guess he must have felt it at about the same time I did. We both looked down, and there was this old he-leopard going right between us. He had gone into the cage, and then had come out through that crack where the levels of the two cages weren't the same.

"Right there a stampede started. In the front of the building was an old show case that we used to keep dried curiosities in. It had a fine glass top. Pa wriggled inside of the case like a snake. But he was so tall that he couldn't get his feet in it, and when he found that they were outside he started to yell like an Indian.

"I got up on top of the show case, and ran over the glass top two or three times. But it didn't break with my weight for a wonder, though I had on a pair of heavy boots.

"The leopard went back alongside the traveling cage, and into a horse stall, and up under a manger. He stayed there snarling and snapping, while we got a lot of plank and laid them down over the top of the stall, and then boarded up the back. That made a big box for the cat. The first thing to do, you know, was to keep him from getting away, and then we could have time to scheme some way to get him back into the cage again.

"Well, the boards didn't come together at the end of the stall, and left cracks probably three or four inches wide. Some way the leopard got his tail out through a crack, and Gil was so excited that he grabbed it. Then he thought he was in for it.

"He commenced to pull at that leopard's tail like a maniac, and what for nobody knew, and they never did know. Of course, the harder he pulled the more the leopard struggled, and the worse it hurt him, and the worse things looked to Gil. The leopard was safe enough, but we couldn't get Gil to understand it.

"Then the leopard started to bite into these planks we had put up—they were only inch boards, and not a very good grade—and every time that the leopard would bite he would take off a splinter as big as the palm of your hand. It was only a matter of a minute or two until he was going to have a hole in front of him big enough to crawl through.

"Well, Gil sat there on the floor with his feet braced against the planks, pulling on that leopard's tail like he was going to pull it off before he stopped. All the time he was yelling for somebody to get a rope or to do something, and the leopard was yowling and spitting like it was possessed of a dozen devils.



Gil Robinson in 1864, about the time he tangled with the leopard in winter quarters. Pfening Archives.

"I'm going to tie a knot in its tail so it can't pull it through this hole and get away," Gil screamed, "and then I'll get out and get a rope for myself.

"You fools would stand there all day and laugh," he went on, "and let this leopard get away and kill somebody before you'd stir yourselves to do anything."

"But the leopard pulled so hard, and there was so much bone in its tail, that Gil couldn't make a knot. Finally, things got too serious. I grabbed Gil and got him to let go of the leopard's tail. The cat was mighty glad to get loose, and went back under the manger. Gil got up off the floor as white as a sheet, and shaking like a leaf. He sat down in a corner while we got another shifting cage, put some meat in it, and pulled away a few planks. The animal walked into the cage after a while and we had no more trouble with him."

II. Pioneer "Rolling Shows"

"Governor, what did a circus look like when you were a boy?" came the very natural question one afternoon after John F. Robinson had taken me through the animal houses, and the training or "ring" barn of the winter quarters of his show in the Little Miami country near Cincinnati.

It was the first question in an interview that began at early lunch in the \$20,000 dining room of the family home at winter quarters. And, as a matter of passing information, the Governor is proud of that dining room.

"I paid as much for the furnishings in it," he said to me when we sat down at the table, "as I did for the first pair of giraffes I ever had with the show.

"The whole thing finally got to be so funny that everybody got to laughing so they couldn't do a thing, and when Gil saw that the leopard was about to eat his way through the plank he got wilder and wilder and commenced to pull on the animal's tail harder than ever, and to abuse us scandalously. That made us laugh harder than ever. Then Gil got desperate, and began to twist the leopard's tail. That made it screech and spit all the more, and Gil yelled like a pirate.

"Here, Gil," Pa yelled at him as soon as he felt that it was safe to crawl out of the show case, "what in the world are you trying to do to that old he-cat?"

"But as far as the people who came to see my show were concerned," he continued, "I might just as well have saved the money that I spent for the beasts, and added it to what I paid for the things in this room. Then I would have had just that much more beautiful place to eat in.

"You know, giraffes are so delicate that hauling them around with a circus is a dangerous thing to do, even under the best of conditions. And this was before I put the show on railroads, and when we had an awful time-getting the wagons across the country.

"So, I was awful proud of my giraffes. No other show had a pair of them. I used to stand around the menagerie to hear what people had to say about them after they looked at the pair. You can imagine my disappointment when all through the season the crowds would just glance at the giraffes, and crowd around the monkeys to look at them—and monkeys were the cheapest things that I could exhibit in the menagerie."

There was little need to ask questions to keep conversation alive on this afternoon. The Governor was born in the early 40's, three hours after his mother rode her horse in the ring of his father's circus. For seventy years he was a performer and a circus owner, taking up the management of the circus where his father laid it down, and building the enterprise into one of the largest tent shows in the world during its heyday. In turn he was succeeded by his son as proprietor of the caravans. A short time ago the show was sold, and the winter quarters are deserted by the Clans of the White Tops and their strange animal companions. The unmistakable odor of menagerie animals, however, still hovers about their former cold weather home.

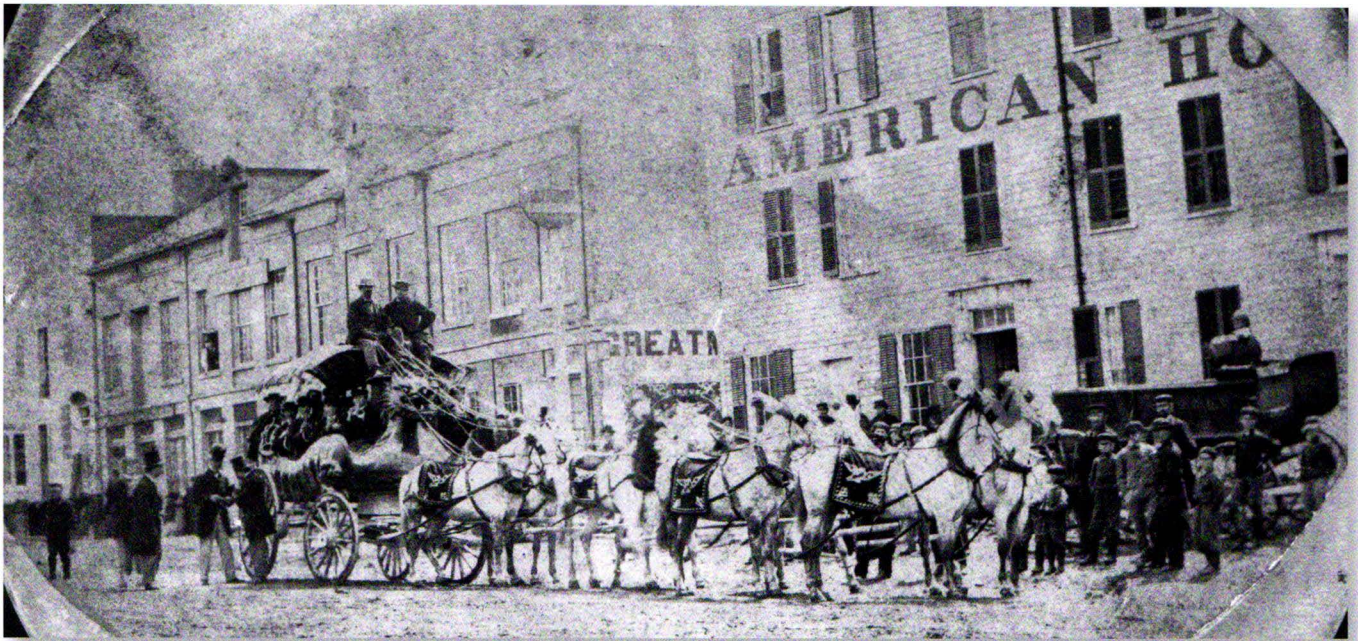
When he built this housing place for his show, the Governor did the job to meet requirements that few other men knew about, and could anticipate. There are shops galore for the building of dens, wagons, and even railroad cars; and animal houses that give something of their natural environment for the animals they were intended to shelter during the winter; ravines and little plateaus for the hardier animals to roam over; level sandy fields for camel herds, and little forests for the elephants. When we wandered through this maze of wonderland, each nook and corner of it suggested to him a story of the White Tops, and of the dazzling gold and mirrored and multi-colored wagons that these buildings had received beneath their friendly roofs.

He told these stories in a string that set delineation heel-trodding upon recital. Under the spell of my environment, and of the unbroken scud of narration across it, a bespangled genie seemed to have caught me up clear of the Little Miami country, and to have set me down in the pages of some unhackneyed Arabian Nights, where characters peered alluringly through rifts in paper-covered hoops, only to disappear, and presently again to come into sight, cutting unheard of didoes upon the backs of beautiful four-legged creatures.

It was not until we returned to our chairs on the shady lawn beside the house that I began to lose the sensation of being afloat upon a magic carpet. Then it occurred to me that of all the things he said there was no word about the appearance of the tent show in the days when he first knew it. Hence the question.

"Well," the Governor replied "there isn't much to tell you about it. There was only one tent, and that was a seventy-five-foot round top, with sidewalls that were only about nine feet high. There was no marquee in front of it where the crowds entered; they went into the tent through an opening in the side wall. The seats were only seven tiers high.

"And for a good many years there was no menagerie tent," he continued. "The seats didn't run all around the inside of the tent, and we had only one ring. After Pa got an elephant, and a few other animals in dens, they were lined up alongside of the ring where there were no seats.



Band chariot, probably dating from the Robinson and Eldred days, possibly as early as 1847 or 1848. Wagon to right of horses is in style of circus baggage wagons of the period. On wall behind the hitch is bill stand. The word "circus" is visible on original photograph. Lettering above it, "Great N" may be "Great National Circus," a title used in 1847 and 1848. This historic picture is likely the earliest image of an American circus bandwagon. Cincinnati Public Library collection.

"Do you know," and here the Governor turned to me, and shook his finger in emphasis of each word that he uttered, "I'd like to see one of those old-fashion circuses again. Maybe I'd be disappointed, though, because a man's likely to look backward on his childhood days with glasses that exaggerate happiness. But there were intermissions between the acts, and then the audience watched the animals from where they sat, because it wasn't very far from the seats across to the dens. The restless motions and roaring of the beasts during the performance always seemed to me to blend in just right with what was going on. And I was sorry when we put up another tent for the menagerie.

"We were the first circus to do it, and it was done for the first time in Atlanta, Georgia.

"Of course," he went on, "a tent of that size didn't take up much room, and we usually showed on a lot that was right in the heart of the little communities we visited—and mostly we showed in the barnyards of the taverns. There were no parades. There was no band with the show for a good many years after I was old enough to remember things about it. Pa had a fiddler, who sat with his back to the center pole, and played alone. Then Pa got a grind organ, and had a canvasman turn it during the performance.

"And I was a good-size boy before he felt that he could afford a band. When he did, he went to New York and brought back six musicians. That band was his pride, and he used to stand around them as much as he could while they were playing. There was one thing about the band, however, that worried him a lot. Once in a while one of the musicians quit playing while the others continued.

"The first time it happened I'll never forget. Ned Kendall was a member of the band, and he played an old-fashion copper-keyed bugle. The band was playing an overture just after the doors were

opened, and Pa was standing beside Kendall, who played a few bars, and then quit. He remained quiet for a long time, and Pa got uneasy.

"Why don't you go on and play?" Pa finally blurted out. 'Go on and play.' 'I can't play,' Kendall told him, 'because I've got thirty bars rest.'

"Rest nothing," Pa yelled at him, 'I hired you to play, not to rest. You can rest all you want to after the show is over.' But even after we got the band there were no parades for a long time. Just before the show got into a town the band wagon was stopped, the horses hitched to it, and to all the other wagons were plumed; the musicians put on their uniforms, and the show came into town with the band playing a lively tune.

"The advertising for a good many years was extremely simple," the Governor went on, "but it was effective. The amount of paper that we use nowadays on one small stand would have lasted the show then for an entire season. There was no pasting, and there were no billboards for years after I knew much about things. Pa had a man he sent ahead of the show on an old mule. He put enough paper for six weeks' billing into the saddlebags, and he was allowed six boxes of tacks to the lot—one box of tacks to a week. The bills were tacked on barns and trees.

"And Pa always went around when the show got into these places to see how good a job the advance man did. There was one thing he always insisted on, that the name of the town and the date be in big type. He kept this up after we commenced to use paper with pictures on it.

"Years after these early days, we started to use a twenty-four-sheet poster, showing the interior of a circus, and an awful big crowd watching the performance. There was everything you can imagine going on in the picture of the ring. The first town we got into where this paper was used we had a slim crowd at the afternoon show. After it was over, Pa walked up town to see how much paper had been used there. On his way he stopped to watch three or four men who were intently examining that stand of paper, and talking about the things on it that they had seen, and the things they had not seen in the show that afternoon.

"Now," one of them said, 'I seen that, and I didn't see that there.'

"I didn't see that neither," another one said.

"Finally, they came to the conclusion that the show was so big—

although it only had one ring, and no menagerie tent—that they had missed a good many of the things pictured on the poster. Just as they were leaving the poster Pa walked over to them.

“No,” he said to them, and pointed to the picture of the enormous crowd, ‘and I didn’t see that big crowd there, either.’

“But the most curious paper we ever used for the show was for the Chinese section of San Francisco,” the Governor went on, his recollection nimbly leaping over nearly two score of years.

“We were the first circus to go to California and back in the same season; theretofore, circuses went there in one season, and came back the next year. The first time we showed in San Francisco we stayed a week, and I found out then that the Chinese are as fond of a circus as any small boy you ever knew. I think every Chinaman in that country came to the first performance, and came back to see every other performance we gave while we were there.

“The next season we went to San Francisco I went ahead of the show. One night the editor of the Chinese newspaper—I think it was the *Sai Gai Yat Bo*—called on me. He wanted an advertisement, and he got it. Then he wanted to print for me some posters, and I let him do that.

“The paper he got out for me was splendid. It was printed on brilliant yellow sheets of paper, in black Chinese characters. There were pictures on it of elephants walking on stilts; a mastodon on a rampage; the ‘Human Catapult’—a man being fired across the canvas out of an enormous spring gun; and enormous pigs and cows. Scattered here and there on the paper were pictures of bareback riders, twisted on their horses like the letter ‘S,’ and a herd of giraffes running at top speed. I think I paid two or three hundred dollars for the printing, and the paper was put up all over the Chinese district.

“Well, when the show came in, I expected to see the same great crowds of Chinese that I had had the season before, but we showed there for a week, and I don’t think I saw a Chinaman under the tents. That made me a little curious, and I began to investigate.

“I found that the year before my elephant man had gone on a crazy drunk one night, and got the fever on him of ‘damn the Chinaman.’ He jumped into a crowd of them over near the horse tents, and grabbed a Chinaman with an extraordinarily long queue. He cut it off with his knife before all the rest of them. The Chinese simply boycotted my show the next season. And the news must have spread all over the United States. That happened in 1892, and for as many years after that as I ran the show I don’t think I ever saw more than a dozen Chinamen all told under my canvas, although before that they attended in every city we visited.

“I’ve often wondered when I watched the crowds come on the show lot,” the Governor said, his mind again reverting to boyhood “whether anyone in the crowd had an idea of the evil ancestry of the circus, and how Pa took it out of the mountebank class, and made it a respectable thing to attend.

“Of course, there was the Roman circus,” he continued, “but it wasn’t the ancestor of the American circus. Our tent shows came from English fairs that were in vogue about the time that the Virginia colonies were being settled.

“These fairs were nothing like our own. They were drinking bouts and wrestling contests, with bull-baiting and animal fights on the side. But these customs were imported and kept alive in this country by the frolics they had in the South before parades on show days for years after I was a grown man. It took a long time there to separate the circus from any hint of these fairs in the minds of the people. The merchants in the towns used to get up animal fights—bears and dogs; wildcats and dogs; two tom cats, or any other kind of an animal that would fight, and do it savagely—as a free attraction to the country people before the circus parade. The fights attracted them

into town early on show day, and they did a lot of spending before they came on the show lot.

“The last time that I saw a show day animal fight was in Valdosta, Georgia, a good many years ago; the practice then was dying out. It was to be a bear and a dog fight in the back yard of a saloon. In this yard was a shed. People coming into town to do their shopping used to stable their teams in it to keep them out of the weather.

“By the time the fight was to start that morning the roof of the shed was loaded with people. A big black bear was tied in the middle of the yard, and about thirty dogs were turned loose in the yard with him. Just as the dogs came yelping toward the bear the roof of the shed fell, and the people on it went down on top of about forty horses. The bear and dog fight was forgotten.

“Fortunately, nobody was badly hurt. But during the excitement the bear managed to slip his collar. Like all buildings in that country, the bar room was set up on posts, which raised the floor about two feet above the ground. Mr. Bear made one dive under the floor, and the dogs followed him. They fought under there for a quite a while, but it was no satisfaction for the crowd—they couldn’t see the skirmish. After a little while of hearing nothing but squeals and grunts the dogs were called off.

“When the bear found he was free, instead of coming back into the yard he made a break into the street, and the dogs took after him. They went down the street like a lot of scared rabbits, and the bear started to climb a tree. When he got about half way up a big dog made a jump and a snap, and got a good hold on the bear’s tail. That settled it. The dog held on. The bear couldn’t go up, and he didn’t want to come down. Finally, he dropped square on the dog. But there was no more fight in that bear, he knew he was whipped, and he walked right back to his box, where he knew he was safe. The dogs solemnly fell into single file behind him, and they made quite a procession down the street to the saloon.

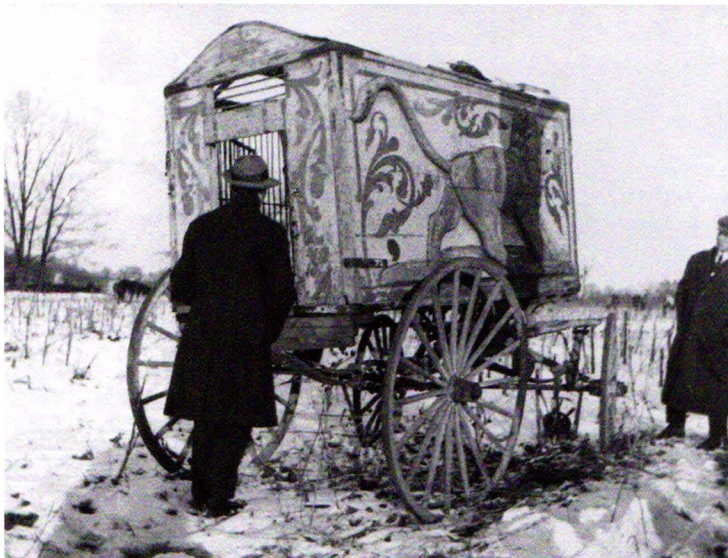
“Then we made our parade, and the crowd followed it back to the lot, where we gave our free show, of a high dive for life, and the doors were opened.

“Some time around the close of the eighteenth century the English became ashamed of the manner in which their fairs were being conducted, and Parliament undertook to do away with them. In the place of these fairs more substantial attractions began to develop. They were specialized into menageries and exhibitions. They were stationary, and they were as much theaters as they were circuses. The stages were enormous, and at the close of the acting performance, acrobats and trained animals were brought in; pony races closed the performances.

“Of course, this class of amusements was imported into America, but it did not flourish here. Pa tried it out in New Orleans before he started our circus, and it was the only financial failure he ever made. Between 1800 and 1860 most of the population of the United States was in the country. Communities were far apart, and the only salvation for showmen was to put their shows on wheels and take them to the people. That was the beginning of the American circus, and it grew into an institution utterly different from any the world ever saw.

“The first of these shows were called ‘rolling shows,’ and they were extremely primitive. None of them traveled very far from the Eastern Coast. When they started out at the beginning of the season, they had hopes of crossing the mountains, and getting into new territory, but when they came to the mountains in Pennsylvania, they turned back, they had troubles enough where they were, and they stopped before they ventured into the midst of new ones. Pa brought the first rolling show into the Middle West.

“He did it because there was a lot of fanaticism and ignorance to buck against in the coast country of the East; people there still asso-



Cage, likely from the wagon show days, at the John Robinson Terrace Park winter quarters near Cincinnati. Photo probably taken about 1915. Cincinnati Historical Society collection.

ciated the circus with the old fairs of England. Various states passed stringent laws, culminating in 1832, in the passage of an act by the legislature of Connecticut fixing the license for the bigger shows at \$1,000 a day. That hit Pa's show, for he had eight wagons, and thirty-five horses, and it was one of the biggest shows then in America. A thousand dollars represented the gross receipts for several weeks.

"These laws drove Pa into the Southern Territory. He developed it, and we practically ruled the South as far as circuses were concerned for a couple of generations. Pa had a trademark, 'southern men, southern women, and southern horses against the world.' I was old enough to be a performer when he took the first circus into Florida and into Texas.

"But when he got ready to do it, Pa broke the Connecticut law to bits. At the same time he took the circus out of the evil class that other people had placed it in and started it on the road to being considered respectable.

"In 1852, he wanted to go into the state of Connecticut. We had been down in Florida, and worked our way north along the coast. The people of Connecticut were circus hungry, but there was that law around the state like a high rail fence. Pa went before the legislature, but it refused to repeal the law. The members of the legislature thought that the sight of a woman in tights was an awful thing, but after Pa promised that the women of his show should wear long skirts when they rode, and the men would wear puffed and frilled shirts and knee breeches, the legislature reduced the license to a decent figure for him and we entered the state.

"That season the feature of the parade was a twenty-horse team. Each one of the horses was a matched cream in color, and had a white mane and tail.

"We also carried the spectacular play of 'Cinderella.' It was rendered by the children with the show, and was done on a grand scale. I was about nine years old then, and my cousin was about the same age. You know in the play the witch comes into the kitchen and asks Cinderella for something to eat just before she turns the pumpkin into a chariot.

"Well, every night the property man had an awful time trying to have something for Cinderella to give her. He would get a loaf of bread for the witch, and when it came out of the ring he would try to save it for the next night, but we boys used to lay for that bread, and it never touched the ground before we had it. We weren't hungry, but we just wanted to be doing something.

"One time the property man managed to hold on to the bread for four nights, and it got so hard and dry that nobody wanted to eat it. Then he got a little careless with it. That was our chance. There was a little creek outside the dressing tent, and I grabbed the loaf of bread, and threw it into the water. When it came time to give the bread to the witch there was none to give her. There was no time to delay, either.

"The candy butcher came along just then with a basket of gingerbread. The property man grabbed a big chunk of it from the basket, and ran into the ring and handed it to Cinderella. After that part of the show was over we boys thought we had struck it rich. Gingerbread! We stole it, and thought we had something soft for the rest of the season if we worked it right.

"Next night we were waiting to get the gingerbread, when we discovered that the property man had provided pound cake. We could hardly wait for the witch to get through looking at it. When it came out we grabbed it, and took two or three mouthfuls. It was yellow corn meal bread made to look like pound cake. Ugh!

"But our venture into



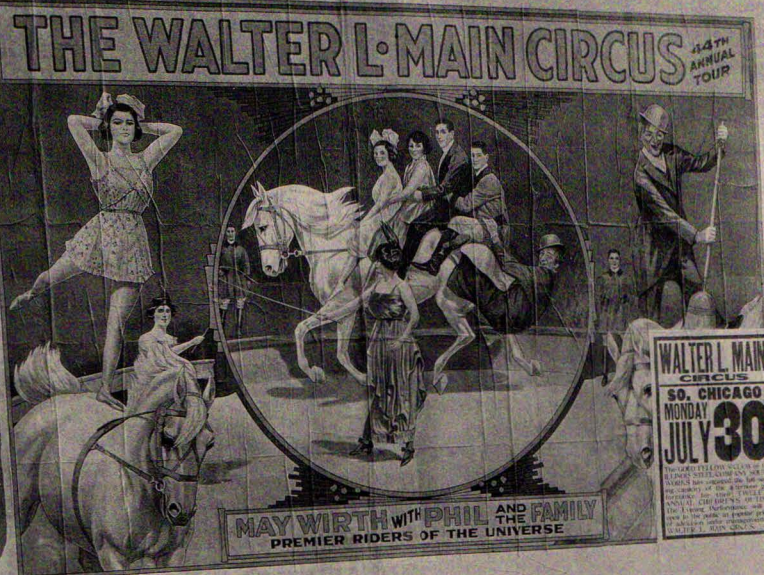
The Robinson mansion at Terrace Park, Ohio. Photo appeared in 1899 John Robinson route book. Pfening Archives.

the state paid. The show did an enormous business. In Hartford we showed on the city commons, and had to give four performances the first day to accommodate the crowds. The menagerie pulled the most of them, because it offered an excuse to those people whose moral scruples were most strict to see the Biblical creatures in real life. You know, in those days we advertised the menagerie animals as 'Biblical creatures,' and I never thought we were far wrong in doing it.

"From that time on circuses no longer were considered an aggregation of vagabonds." **BW**

TER L. MAIN CIRCUS
O. CHICAGO
NDAY JULY

30



May Wirth, along with her brother, Phil, and the Wirth Family received top billing on Andrew Downie's 1923 Walter L. Main Circus. This multiple sheet included a specially printed announcement for the July 30 Good Fellow Club benefit in South Chicago. Circus World Museum collection.

WALTER L. MAIN CIRCUS SOUTH CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, JULY 30, 1923

The big rolling mill complex in South Chicago, Illinois, erected in 1875, was one of several steelworks built around the country in the last third of the 19th century to satisfy the nearly insatiable demand for steel railroad rails. In 1901 the 300-acre site, then owned by the Federal Steel Corporation, became part of the world's first billion dollar corporation, United States Steel. Yet it retained its own peculiar identity as the Illinois Steel Company-South Works for years thereafter.

A chapter of the Good Fellow Club was formed by management in 1912 to engage in socially beneficial activities and raise the general tenor of the community through these activities. It was the club's buy-out of the matinee performance of the Walter L. Main Circus on July 30, 1923 that sparked this essay and photo feature. An unidentified professional photographer captured the essence of that benevolent act, carried out with a steel mill as a backdrop, in no less than thirty-three 8" x 10" views of great quality. The organizers of the Good Fellow Club may have reflected on the success of the June 18, 1911 appearance of Hagenbeck-Wallace in South Chicago when choosing an outing for the children of the community.

The man behind the 1923 Walter L. Main Circus was Andrew Downie. Born with the surname McPhee, he was Canadian, originating near Exeter, Ontario, on August 13, 1863. Why his last name was dropped in favor of Downie has not been explained. By 1884 he was a partner in the Downie & Austin Parlor Circus, progressing to dog and pony show status in 1891. He tried another partnership, toured an overland outfit, labored for Ben Wallace a few seasons and then inaugurated a wagon show under his own name in 1904. In 1906 Downie went on rails and enjoyed modest success. A partnership with Al Wheeler from 1911 to 1913 fielded a medium-sized railroad outfit that would have prospered further, had not their wives compelled them to go their separate ways. After the split of the property Downie took out the LaTena show before leasing the venerable Walter L. Main title starting in 1918. The tour of 1923 was proclaimed as the 44th of the Main show. It rode on 15 cars in 1921 and may have been in the 20-car class shortly thereafter.

The South Chicago date was surely one of the best showings of Downie's circus. The buy-out of the entire matinee to the steel plant's Good Fellow Club was supplemented by great evening show business.



The Main train arrived early on Sunday, July 29, after a run over the Pere Marquette Railroad from Greenville, Michigan, where Downie had started his career as a traveling showman. Downie never upgraded to steel cars before he sold the show. All photos from Pfening Archives unless otherwise noted.



The unloading of the un-caged animals, principally elephants, horses and lead stock, such as camels, usually attracted the most attention from bystanders. The daily rituals of the circus fascinated onlookers.

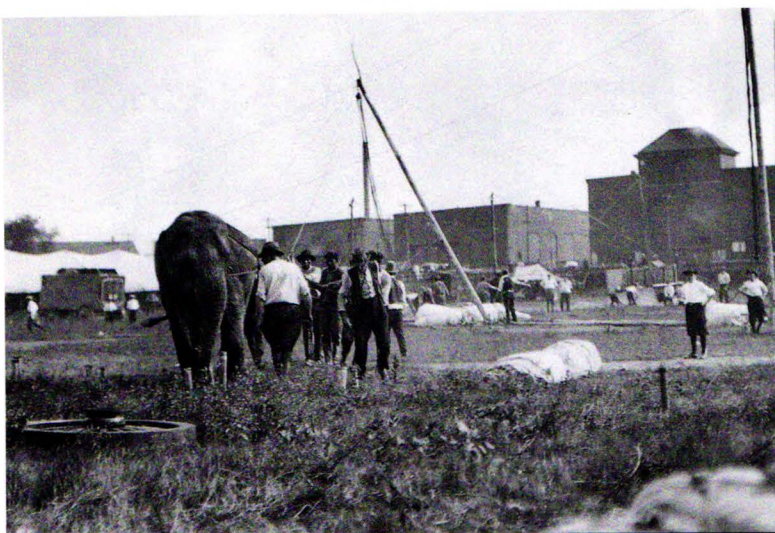


Downie took delivery of a new stake driver fabricated by the Moeller brothers of Baraboo in the summer of 1923, thereby greatly reducing the labor necessary to erect the canvas city.

There were also notable advances in the show's physical plant. A new big top, menagerie top and cook tents delivered by Driver Bros. were erected for the first time. Also received was a new gas engine-powered stake driver from the Moeller brothers in Baraboo, Wisconsin, specialists in their fabrication for about two decades.

Fletcher Smith, Press Agent for the Downie outfit, contributed this overview of the day's activities, "Main Happenings," to the August 11, 1923 *Billboard*: "Everybody was looking forward to the South Chicago, Ill., engagement and hoping for an early arrival Sunday morning, July 29. . . . It was a 220-mile jump to South Chicago and the run was made in much better time than anticipated. South Chicago was reached about 12:30 [PM] and the unloading

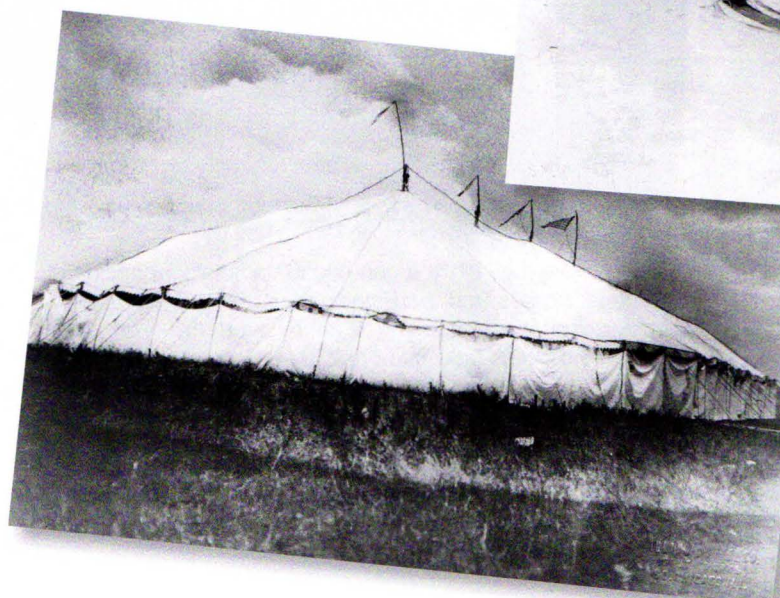




After driving the stakes, the next step was in erecting the big top was pulling up the center poles. An elephant strains against the harness to pull one of the two middle poles into a vertical orientation.



The Main show canvas crew assembled the new Driver Bros. big top for the first time at the South Chicago date. Soon a full set of new, white canvas tops adorned the Main show lot.

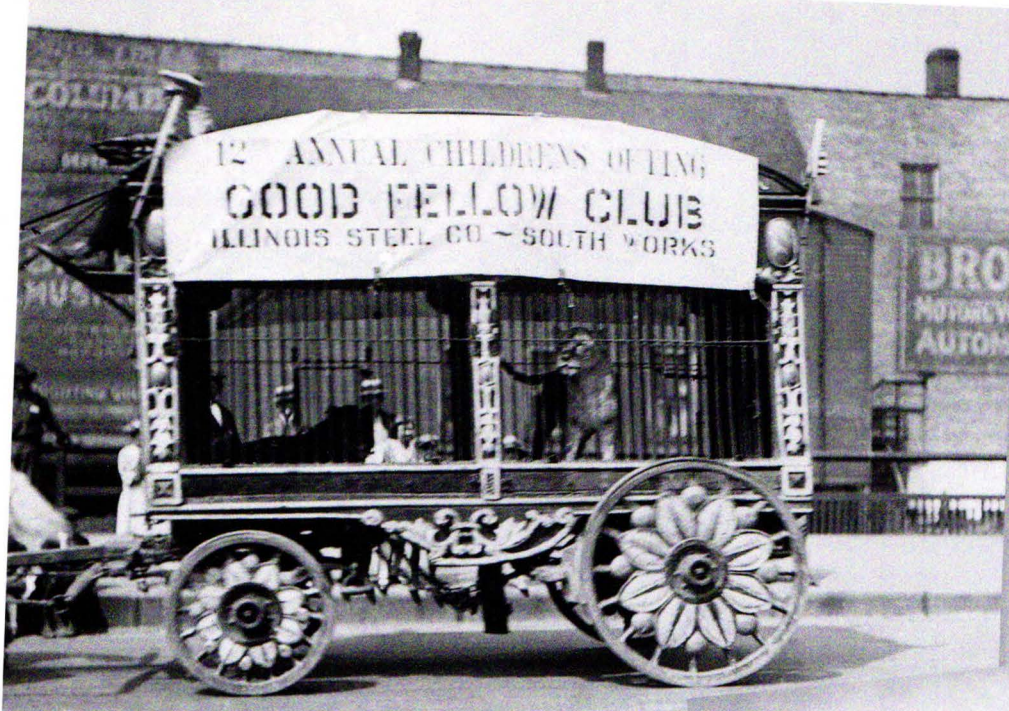


It looks like a big bunch of clean canvas, but a new "white top" was among the most recognizable icons of the traveling circus in America. Downie saved on delivery expense by having the manufacturer deliver it only a few miles away from the Chicago factory.

was right on the main street, but a few blocks from the playground of the Illinois Steel Company's plant. The Good Fellows' [sic] Club of the plant, where the children had been assembled, arranged for the entertainment of 5,000 kiddies. The parade went out as usual Monday morning with every wagon decorated with special banners announcing the twelfth annual outing of the Good Fellows' [sic] Club. After the first parade the two bands of the circus with the elephants went over to the steel plant, where the children had been assembled, and there was a second parade to the show grounds. There were more than 5,000 children in line, all wearing fantastic paper hats and the little girls all in white. The three tents were laid

out so that they marched first through the side-show, then into the menagerie and then in the big top. Walter Driver had come over early Sunday morning with the new top, and it was used here for the first time. There were seats enough for all the kids and the afternoon show was one of the prettiest sights in the history of the Main circus. . . . Business at night was so big that the [ticket] wagon was closed and it would have been a swell two-day stand for the show. There was the customary crowd of Chicago visitors and included in the list were James Patterson, and his assistant manager J. C. Atkins [Jess Adkins], Jud Kelly, Chauncey Jacobs, son of Jim Jacobs, in his time one of the best hostlers in the show business, and others from the Gentry-Patterson show, including the writer's old friend, 'Spike' Hennessey, who used to be with Martin Downs. Then Ed Meredith was on hand, with Hank H. Whittier, who has the Moose Band in Chicago, and there was a great visitation."

Downie operated the Main show through 1924, selling it to the Miller brothers who revised the property and took it out in 1925 as the second edition of their 101 Ranch Wild West. Off the road in 1925, Downie evaluated the economics of motorized circus operations and in 1926 fielded the Downie Bros. Circus on trucks. It is generally acknowledged as the first truly successful motorized show. He remained active as a circus owner until 1929 and died the following year on December 17.



This fancy cage was fabricated by the Bode Wagon Company for the 1916 Sparks Circus tour. Why Charlie Sparks sold it so quickly to Andrew Downie is a mystery.



The 1902 Sells & Downs steam calliope, in rebuilt form and played by Billy Emerson, heralded the end of the Main daily street parade. The crowd lining the sidewalks is a good indicator of the interest the circus generated.

Of the 1923 Main circus, one artifact survives. The steam calliope, fabricated by the Bode Wagon Company in Cincinnati for the Sells & Downs circus, passed to the Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West and eventually the Bill Hames Shows, a railroad carnival, reaching preservation at the Circus World Museum in the early 1960s. It carries the carved skyboards from a 1916-built cage by Bode, one that Downie bought from Charlie Sparks and which is also documented in the 1923 photos. The original steam instrument was replaced in the late 1920s by a compressed air calliope. The



Despite having a good complement of wagons, Downie's outfit still fielded this small cross cage. By 1923 most railroad shows had dispensed with them.

1903 Ringling Bros.' Great Britain Tableau, which also survives, wasn't acquired by Downie until 1924 and thereby wasn't present in South Chicago.

The mammoth South Chicago steel plant was demolished after 1992 and stands as a re-development opportunity. Nothing remains beyond the set of photographs to document the benevolent actions of the Good Fellow Club in the community so long ago. Fred Dahlinger Jr., Curator of Circus History, Circus Museum, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. **BW**



A modern day Pied Piper, Musical Director W. B. Fowler and the big show band lead an army of children through the streets of South Chicago, past the steelworks, to the circus lot.



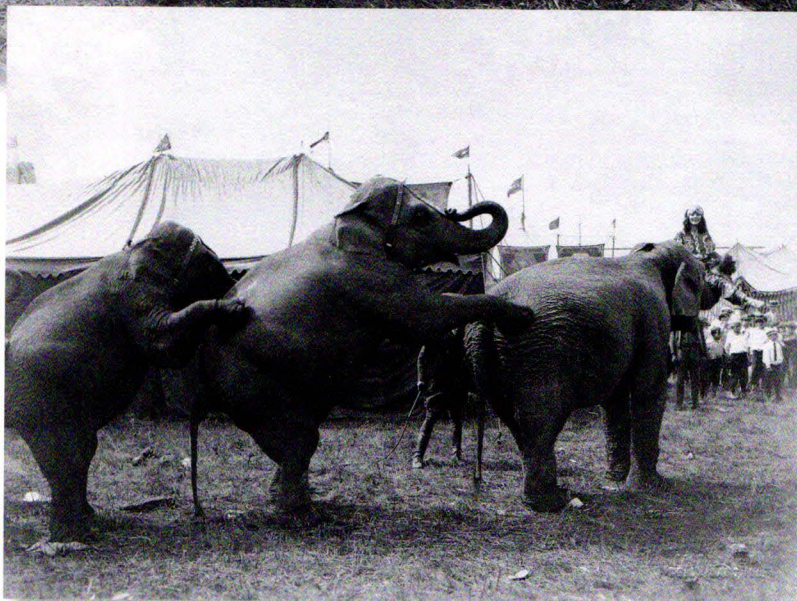
Signage made it clear that the big circus day was sponsored by the South Works Good Fellow Club. There was an abundance of police everywhere, to assure that order and decorum were maintained.



The grassy lot and front door of the Main circus presented a substantial contrast to the industrial architecture of smokestacks, blast furnaces and bridge cranes of the South Works steel plant that dominated the background.



The Wirth family, particularly May, headlined the Main circus performance in 1923. The sponsors are in ties, with Mrs. Wirth, Phil, May and Stella filling out the photo, left to right. Circus World Museum collection.



This three elephant act presided over by Everett Cowan was adequate for the Main show, which apparently had a three-ring layout under a four-pole big top. It wasn't huge, a 120 round with three 40s, but it was good circus in all regards.

The #45 Main light plant, with the unusual roof lines and a gas engine exhaust muffler on the front, was parked between the marquee and the ticket wagon, close to the principal users of electric power for incandescent lighting.





The matinee crowd of five to seven thousand children filled Downie's new big top to capacity. There was little doubt that the performers had an enthusiastic crowd in South Chicago.

A proud Andrew Downie, in tie and shirtsleeves, fourth from the right, stands amidst men either from his staff or the management of the Illinois Steel Company and the Good Fellow Club. July 30, 1923 was a big day for him. Pork pie hats and straw boaters were the order of the day.



The Bulger and Cheney United Show and Aggregation of African, Asiatic and Oriental Wonders

by Bob Cline

As the first decade of the 20th century neared completion, popular entertainment took many forms such as vaudeville, moving pictures, amusement parks, minstrel shows, Uncle Tom's Cabin shows, carnivals and circuses. Someone with ambition and hard cash could get a start in the circus business by visiting the piles of circus dreams at William P. Hall's farm in Lancaster, Missouri.

While Hall excelled as a horse dealer, his foray into the circus world turned out to be quite profitable as well. Show owners from around the country came to Hall for show equipment, wagons, railroad cars, and all kinds of animals, especially elephants and horses. In 1911 Hall dealt with many shows, including the Young Buffalo Wild West, Howe's Great London, Famous Robinson, Yankee Robinson, Ringling Bros., Kit Carson's Buffalo Ranch Wild West, W. H. Coutler's Famous Railroad Shows and Indian Pete's Wild West, and E. G. Smith's Colossal Shows. He also provided the equipment necessary to frame the Bulger and Cheney Circus.

In the fall of 1910 a goat act performed by Corliss Bulger attracted the attention of David "Dud" Cheney; they talked about creating a partnership in the dog and pony show business. Bulger, the performer, and Cheney, the entrepreneur, established their Bulger and Cheney Circus in Sparta, Wisconsin, utilizing the local fairgrounds as winter quarters.

Bulger's hometown was Necedah, Wisconsin. The son of Frank H. Bulger and Elizabeth Roberts Bulger, he was one of five children including four sons, Corliss, Clyde, Howard, and Halbert, and one daughter, Hazell.

Cheney was born in Montevideo, Minnesota, on November 12, 1879. His father was David Wilmot Cheney; his mother, the former Eleanor Gardner. Following his education in the Sparta, Wisconsin, schools, he moved to Milwaukee in 1900 where he studied dentistry. He operated a dental laboratory in Minneapolis until 1906 when he became a banker in Olivia, Minnesota. After three years in banking, he returned to Sparta.

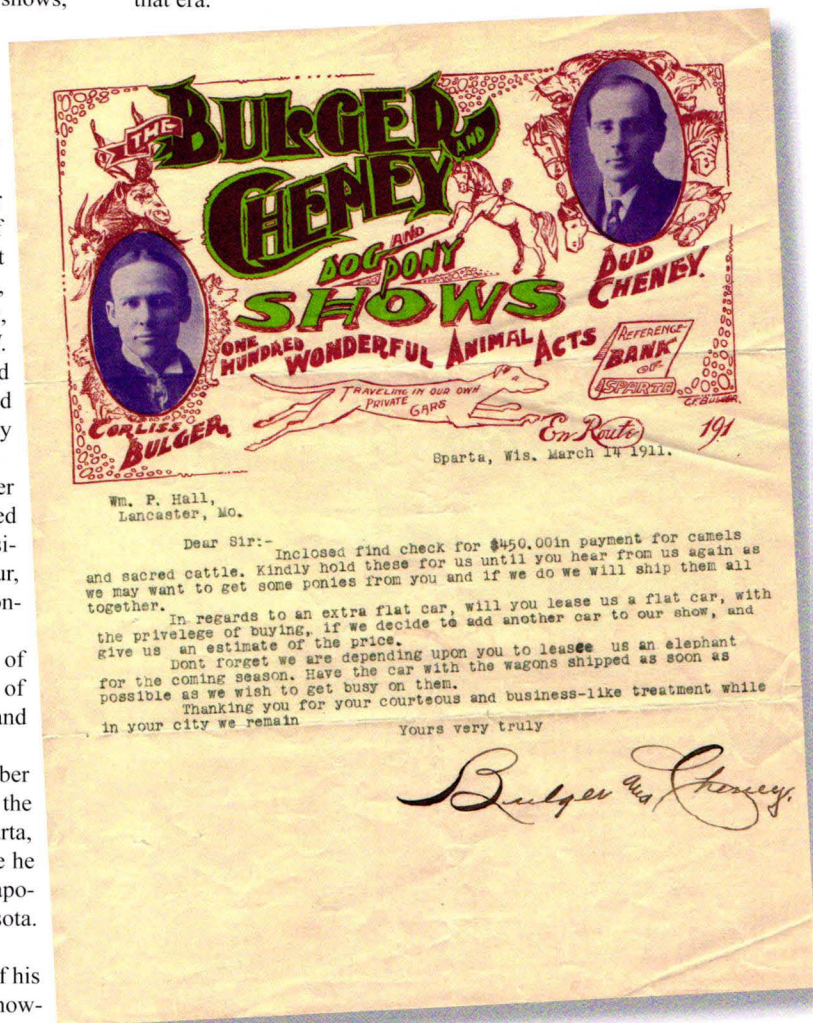
Cheney's return to his hometown marked the beginning of his show-business career. He purchased two theaters in town, showing movies and learning the live entertainment trade.

Envisioning their dog and pony show hitting the road, the showmen placed an ad in the January 14, 1911, *Billboard*: "BULGER AND CHENEY'S TRAINED ANIMAL SHOWS"

"Want miniature cages and parade wagons, small band wagons, ticket wagons, pony chariots, pony trappings. Also want to lease three more cars, one combination sleeper, 60 or 70 ft., one 70 ft. baggage car, one 50 ft. flat car. Show opens Sparta, WI. May 15th."

The *Necedah Republican* reported on January 26, 1911, that Bulger and Cheney had met the previous autumn when Bulger's goat act appeared in Sparta. Cheney had sold his theaters by now and plans were underway to build the new show.

Shopping for show equipment and animals, Bulger and Cheney traveled to Lancaster, Missouri, to meet William P. Hall, whose correspondence offers insights about how shows were framed in that era.



Eye-catching letterhead used by the Bulger and Cheney Circus in 1911. Hall Papers, Circus World Museum.

A letter from the Bulger and Cheney Dog and Pony Shows to Hall, dated February 23, 1911, and signed by Bulger, asked if Hall would consider renting three cars to them with the option of buying them at any time. Bulger and Cheney eventually did own the three cars—a flat, a coach, and a baggage car. Their letter of March 9 enclosed a check for \$1825 for the cars and wagons. Bulger and Cheney asked that Hall kindly load the wagons on the flat and ship them as quickly as possible. As an after-thought, the new show owners asked if their camels were broken to ride or drive.

COMING TO WAUPUN
Wednesday, MAY 31
BULGER & CHENEY
COMBINED R. R. SHOWS.
THE NEWEST BIG SHOW
THE BIGGEST NEW SHOW

We do not claim to have the Biggest Show on earth. We indulge in no idle boasts, on the contrary we freely admit there are others, but we do contend **NONE ARE BETTER.** With this end in view we have gathered together the very best

ARTISTS, ACTORS, ATHELETES, CLOWNS & Acrobats.
 No mediocre, no ordinary performer has been considered for a minute. Every man and woman with us has been chosen because they are the **VERY BEST** in their respective lines.

There is no show exhibiting anywhere whose management is more zealous in looking after the comfort and accomodation of its patrons. The most ample arrangements have been made to prevent overcrowding and every appliance has been provided for convenience and safety. Our ushers will be found **COURTEOUS AND POLITE** and especially care for ladies and children.

Positively No Grafting or Faking Around Our Shows.

A MONSTER ENSEMBLE
 of Performing Elephants, Horses, Ponies, Dogs, Monkeys, Goats and Geese.

Sensational LOOP-THE-LOOP
 IN AN AUTOMOBILE

Stars of the World's Arenas,
Aerialists, Famous Acrobats, High and Slack Wire Artists and Jugglers.

Our category or acts is here complete. Naught that is worthy of prominence has been omitted or forgotten. Sensation follows sensation. A thrill a minute throughout the three hours' program. A potpourri of **PERILOUS, PENDULATING, PERSPICACIOUS and PERPLEXING PERFORMANCES.**

Grand Free STREET PARADE Daily
 LEAD BY OUR
SUPERB MILITARY BAND
Two Performances Daily, 2 and 8 p. m. **--Two**
REMEMBER THE DAY AND DATE
Wednesday, MAY 31st.
 Not boisterously asserting our Supremacy but calmly and Confidently Awaiting Your Verdict

Newspaper ad for Bulger and Cheney for engagement at Waupun, Wisconsin, May 31, 1911. Note rhetoric at bottom of text: "Not boisterously asserting our Supremacy but calmly and Confidently Awaiting Your Verdict." Bob Parkinson Newspaper Volumes, Circus World Museum.

A follow-up letter was sent the next day, March 10, asking Hall to load the band wagon, cages, baggage wagon, water wagon, and January wagon and to ship them over the Chicago, Milwaukee, & St. Paul Railroad. They also asked Hall to delay sending the baggage car and coach until the show was ready for them.

A check for \$450 was sent on March 14 for several camels and sacred oxen with a similar request to delay shipping them. Bulger and Cheney also wrote, "Don't forget we are depending upon you to lease us an elephant for the coming season," acknowledgment of Hall's well-known rental and sale of pachyderms. They asked about leasing another flat car with the option to purchase.

Plans for their new show rapidly became a reality. Having secured from Hall enough wagons and parade equipment for a quarter-mile parade, they dropped by Chicago and ordered the canvas for their big top (which would hold one ring) before returning to Sparta.

Bulger and Cheney wrote to Hall on March 28, 1911, to introduce Corliss Bulger's brother Howard as the man who would accompany the animals during shipment. Howard Bulger headed to Lancaster with a list of equipment needs; Hall was to check for items on their list and to make them a reasonable offer. Hall was also asked to secure the best possible rate for the cars to be sent on their way to Sparta.

The entertainment Bible *Billboard* reported in April that "Messrs. Bulger and Cheney have returned to Sparta, Wis. From Lancaster, Mo. where they purchased from W. P. Hall four carloads for parade and ring stock. The Bulger and Cheney show has been enlarged, so that it has been necessary to add three new cars to the rolling stock, one baggage car and two flats."

The next news about the Bulger and Cheney Circus doesn't appear until almost a month later in the local newspapers. Aside from the press agent's hyperbole, the article reported that the season was scheduled to begin on May 16 in Sparta and the show would appear on May 24 in Necedah, Wisconsin, Bulger's hometown.

In May, performers began arriving in Sparta for rehearsals. The Feigan family from Chicago signed on as musicians. All the seats surrounding the single ring would offer the estimated 1000 customers a prime view of the performance. Menagerie and sideshow tents joined others throughout the lot. The Sparta fairground was looking more like a circus every day.

With some railcars on site already and three more expected soon, what started out as a simple dog and pony show had now grown to an eight-car railroad operation before it even hit the road. Wagons had all been painted, repaired, and cleaned within the last two months. A new gas light system offered 4000 candle-powered lights in the big top. This lighting system was so popular at the time that even the Ringlings had decided to use it.

The menagerie offered a variety of animals which included a new-born porcupine and pony. Adding to the menagerie were trained goats, ponies, dogs, trained geese, sacred oxen and camels bought from Hall, and the draft horses used by the show.

The title the show used in most of its advertising was The Bulger and Cheney Combined Railroad Shows. The owners recruited Mrs. David Cheney to be treasurer. Dr. Filly was the contracting agent. Chuck Daniels was sideshow manager, and S.A. Butler the equestrienne director. Other staff included George Young, privileges; J.R. Feigan and S.E. Lyman, musical directors; L.E. Birthe, props; George Kelly, ring stock; Howard Bulger, 24-hour man; Sid N. Smith, legal adjuster; Jim Murphy, chandelier lighting; and Frank Hill, trainmaster. With the season rapidly approaching, Harry McGuire, who worked as a chandelier man, broke his leg and required a six-week stay in the hospital. He returned to the show in July.

Opening day arrived on May 16, 1911, in Sparta. The show had moved off the fairgrounds and over to the Poole lot. The reviews of the show indicated that it was greatly enjoyed by all. The *Necedah Republican* expressed its approval: "The show is clean and devoid of anything objectionable even to the most delicate sensibilities,



Photo purported to be Bulger and Cheney train being unloaded. Bandwagon on first flat car was formerly on Yankee Robinson. Circus World Museum collection.

and Messrs. Bulger and Cheney should meet with big success.”

By the time the show reached Necedah, eight days after opening, everyone was doing well despite the weather. Four days into the season, the show had already confronted tremendous downpours.

The May 20, 1911, *Billboard* reported that the show added three more teams of horses, now giving them 27 head of draft stock to move the equipment to and from the train.

Reviewers of the show seemed to like the one-ring format; patrons could see all that was going on, truly getting their monies worth, as compared to the huge three-ring circuses that left customers wondering after the performance what they had missed. Two reviews noted the show was clean and very neat with the management, equipment and special features making it a model show.

An advertisement in the *Daily Northwestern* of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, referred to the “Newest Big Show and the Biggest New Show.” The circus carried no grift. The ensemble promised performing elephants, horses, ponies, dogs, monkeys, goats and geese. In addition to the huge street parade and military band, there was also a sensational Loop-the-Loop automobile act. Only the advertised performing elephants did not materialize, as we will see later.

Early in the season, *Billboard* provided a complete rundown of the show’s performance. Opening the one-ring performance was Roy Hogan, assisted by five riders as they piloted six Arabian horses through a garland entry. The performance then featured the following:

Display 2. Howard Bulger’s troupe of trained dogs, ten in number.

Display 3. Arzeno Duo, hand-to-hand balancers and ground tumblers.

Display 4. Frank Rusk and the clowns.

Display 5. Dolph Voight on the swinging wire.

Display 6. A diving dog act.

Display 7. Howard Bulger and his four matched Shetland ponies.

Display 8. Frank Rusk and the clowns.

Display 9. The Arzenos in an aerial display.

Display 10. A dog and pony act.

Display 11. January act.

Display 12. Charles Sweet, rope spinner and rough rider.

Display 13. The Juggling Voights.

Display 14. Professor LaCroix, balancing trapeze act.

Display 15. Corliss Bulger’s 10 trained goats, four dogs and five ponies.

Display 16. La Croix’s European Gymnasts.

The same article reported that showmen Dode Fisk and George “Popcorn” Hall were in attendance, and both of them thought the show was a first-class performance.

A letter from David Cheney’s father to “My Dear Dud” told of some of the troubles the show experienced with the railroads crossing state lines. The railroads also did not want to pull the leased cars from another railroad. He reminded Dud to contact Minnesota and South Dakota about licenses. The circus had also received a contract to appear at a fair, but Dud’s father turned it down because he would have to get permission from the railroad commission yet again to cross state lines—a total of three times in a short period. Some personnel changes were made along the way; William “Dutch” Wildenradt joined the show as the boss hostler by mid-June.

News of the upcoming return to Sparta of the Bulger and Cheney show came in early July when they decided to give another day’s performance in Sparta on Saturday, July 8. At the season opening

stand at Sparta, many of the residents had not attended because of torrential rains. But overall, business was poor. The route took the circus into South Dakota and southern Minnesota, now decimated by a drought that had dried up every crop that had been planted. The show cancelled all dates in that region and returned home. The local newspaper reported there would be a week off while they re-routed the show; in fact, the show didn't go back out until the 26th of July. The show purchased a prominent ad in the *Monroe County Democrat* advertising the July 8 return to Sparta due to the terrible drought, and the need to re-route the show and get it on its way again.

is Charles Sweet acting as the cook and one of the clowns, the Wallingford Sisters doing an aerial act, Arthur Little with animals, Bob Henry with dogs and monkeys, William Moore with the learned lion, the Flying Reagans, and Aft Belhardt doing a high dive act.

The sideshow carried Jones and Wilson, Minstrel Trio; Nellie Daisy, toe dancer; Art Evans, tattooed man; Mlle. La Tori, snakes, and another musical act. With the re-emergence of the Bulger and Cheney Combined Railroad Shows, the advertising remained almost the same. In addition to the Loop-to- Loop

J. D. BARRETT

MIDWAY STABLES
Minnesota Transfer
St. Paul, Minn.

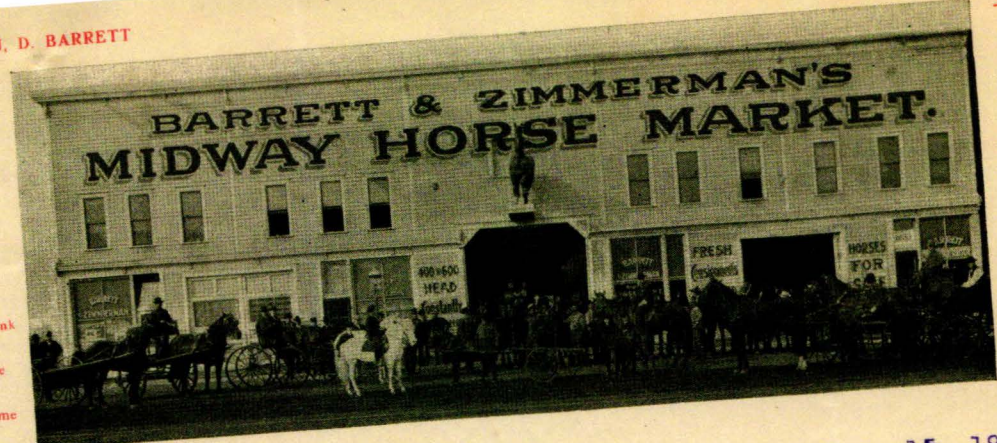
DULUTH STABLES
Opposite Postoffice
Duluth, Minn.

Reference
First National Bank
Minneapolis

Nat. Ger. Amer. Bank
St. Paul

American Exchange
Bank, Duluth

Farm, Stock and Home
Minneapolis



**BARRETT & ZIMMERMAN'S
MIDWAY HORSE MARKET.**

C. ZIMMERMAN

AUCTIONS
Every Wednesday

PRIVATE SALES
Daily
From 300 to 500 Head
Constantly on Hand

Telephones
N. W. Midway 64
Either City
Tri-State 8068 Park
Either City

Midway, St. Paul, Minn.

Dec. 15, 1910.

In September of 1911, the Bulger and Cheney Circus was sold to Barrett and Zimmerman's Midway Horse Market in St. Paul, Minnesota. Barrett and Zimmerman was a major horse brokerage company and a competitor to William P. Hall in selling draft stock to circuses. Ringling Papers, S. O. Braathen collection, Milner Library, Illinois State University collection.

The show's return to Sparta on Friday evening was an unusual timetable of travel for a railroad show. The troupe prepared for their Saturday performances. With the extreme heat of the summer upon them, they attracted a less than desirable turnout for the afternoon show but had a good crowd later that evening. While the advance crews were out trying to re-route the show, news circulated that the circus would travel down the Viroqua branch where it would play in Cashton, Weatby, and Viroqua later the next week. That didn't happen, however.

Almost two and a half weeks after the mid-season closing at Sparta, the show prepared to hit the road again with an opening date in Spring Valley, Minnesota. During the layover, Bulger and Cheney had re-evaluated their offerings to the public. One of the owners went to New York and met with Louis Ruhe, the noted animal importer. A deal was reached whereby the Bulger and Cheney show bought a two-and-a-half-year-old Nubian lion, a llama, and a three-year-old baby elephant. The article clarified the status of elephants on the show by stating that the show had never had a pachyderm before and the children really expected to see one.

A list of people compiled by Isaac Marcks in Fred Dahlinger's research files for the book he co-authored with Stuart Thayer, *Badger State Showmen*, when compared to the *Billboard* performance review in June, reveals that many of the acts were apparently replaced when the show closed on July 8. Mentioned in Marcks' list

automobile jump, performing animals now included donkeys although not the elephants as had been advertised earlier in the season.

The *Oelwein (Iowa) Register*, reported that the afternoon show was well attended. The crowds thoroughly enjoyed the wire walkers, trained goats, ponies, and donkeys, and the trapeze artists. The show lasted a solid, exciting two hours. Those who didn't get to see it should go that night, the paper advised. The article went to press along with the rest of the newspaper and was passed around town that evening as a review of the afternoon show.

Business improved somewhat as new dates were booked and the show continued its tour. By mid-September, the circus approached Milwaukee. Dud Cheney told the *Sparta Herald* that he had a couple of offers to buy the show and that he had accepted a very good offer from a man in St. Paul, Minnesota. After closing at West Salem, Wisconsin, the show immediately came under new ownership.

When asked about the season as a whole, both Bulger and Cheney agreed it had been a good one aside from the normal weather problems and, of course, the drought. They felt they had survived the season very well, and in gratitude to the troupe, they hosted a huge banquet for all staff and performers at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, September 16, before one and all went their separate ways.

Frank Groves made arrangements to transfer the Bulger and Cheney United Show and Aggregation of African, Asiatic and Oriental Wonders to J. P. Rogers, who had the circus transported to the Hennepin County Fair in Minnesota. Rogers was just the front man; the real buyer was Moses Zimmerman of the Barrett and Zimmerman Midway Horse Market in St. Paul. Asked about the purchase two days later, Zimmerman told reporters that the show seemed like a great opportunity for purchase and sale at a profit. Bulger and Cheney owed nothing. An offer was made and accepted and the sellers were paid in cash.

Billboard

FOR SALE

BULGER & CHENEY SHOW

Complete eight-car show, assembled new last spring. Want to sell it all complete for show purposes. Includes one 74-foot and one 60-foot sleeping car; one 60-foot flat car; ten fine dapple gray horses; six light horses; six trained ponies; three trick donkeys and a fine lot of animals, including an elephant, lion, leopard, monkeys, llamas, sacred cows and numerous other animals. The outfit includes main tent, side show tent, wardrobe tent, horse tent, cook tent and complete lighting and cooking outfits. We have this show so we can sell it right, and any one who will buy it complete will get a bargain. Address,

BARRETT & ZIMMERMAN,
ST. PAUL, MINN.

Animal Act At Liberty. October 15.

In the dead of winter after having received very few offers to buy the show, the Barrett and Zimmerman placed a more detailed list of the equipment for sale in *Billboard* in January of 1912. This time they asked \$4000 for the remaining properties. The itemized list included the monkey loop-to-loop act. The earlier list of 20 wagons and cages now included only 14. A condensed version of this ad was also found in the *Manitoba Free Press* from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada on January 27. With little success selling the equipment, and having reduced the sale price for the entire lot to \$3500, Barrett and Zimmerman once again offered the entire conglomeration in *Billboard* in April. Eventually, the basics of this lot were sold to J. H. Garrett's Minnesota-based circus known as Rice Bros. Colossal Railroad Shows.

Although Bulger and Cheney discussed putting a show out again in 1912, they did not. The 1911 season had not been a good one for the circus industry. Dan Robinson's Famous Robinson Circus had failed. The W. H. Coulter Show and Indian Pete's Wild West had problems. Campbell Bros. Circus finished its 1911 tour in Texas, far from home, and failed to survive the 1912 season. The John Robinson Circus, under the direction of the Robinson family, called it quits in 1911.

Little information exists about the later years of Corliss Bulger. He was associated with a June Hall animal show and eventually ended up out West. When his mother died in 1917, the obituary listed him as a resident of Enumclaw, Washington.

David Cheney remained in Sparta where he owned and operated a drug store until 1919. His 1900 marriage to Sophia M. Anderson produced four children, Roswell G., David

W., Ruth, and John, who died in infancy. In 1919 after selling the drug store, Cheney was elected to the office of councilman where he served for eight years and acted as president for four of those years. He then served his town as a justice of the peace for eight years. Cheney passed away March 9, 1943, in Sparta, Wisconsin. **BW**

ENDNOTES

1. *The Necedah Republican*, March 16, 1911, page 1.
2. *Billboard*: April 8, 1911, page 23.
3. *The Necedah Republican*, April 27, 1922, page 1.
4. *The Monroe County Democrat*, May 11, 1911.
5. *Billboard*, April 29, 1911, page 60.
6. *The Monroe County Democrat*, May 11, 1911.
7. *The Necedah Republican*, May 25, 1911, page 1.
8. *Billboard*, June 10, 1911, page 25.
9. Letter from David W. Cheney, June 2, 1911, copy at Monroe County Historical Society.
10. *The Monroe County Democrat*, July 6, 1911.
11. *The Necedah Republican*, July 27, 1911.
12. *The Carroll Times* (Carroll, Iowa), August 3, 1911, page 2.
13. *The Oelwein Register* (Oelwein, Iowa), August 14, 1911, page 4.
14. *Monroe County Democrat*, September 21, 1911.
15. *The Waterloo Evening Courier* (Waterloo, Iowa), September 19, 1911, page 9.
16. *Billboard*: October 28, 1911, page 27.
17. *Billboard*, January 6, 1912, page 34.
18. Typed notes at Circus World Museum Library.

Barrett and Zimmerman unsuccessfully tried to flip Bulger and Cheney soon after acquiring it. This ad is from the September 30, 1911 *Billboard*. After selling some equipment piecemeal and dropping the price, Barrett and Zimmerman finally unloaded the remaining physical plant sometime after April 1912. Pfening Archives.

The Barrett and Zimmerman Midway Horse Market offered the complete eight-car circus for sale in *Billboard* on September 30, 1911. Included were one 74 foot- and one 60-foot sleeper and one 60-foot flatcar. (These were the three bought from William P. Hall.) Also available for sale were 10 dapple gray horses, six ponies, three trick donkeys, an elephant, a lion, a leopard, monkeys, llamas, sacred camels, and other animals. All show tents and equipment were available as well.

The same show was again advertised in *Billboard* near the end of October. This ad stated that the three railcars were for sale and the other cars had been leased (now giving us a better understanding of the show's movements). The elephant had apparently been sold by now as it no longer appeared in the for-sale notice. It is not apparent who bought this elephant or what name was used to identify it. The 10 dapple gray horses now were reduced to six light horses; Barrett and Zimmerman were apparently successful in selling the draft stock.

QUEER TRICKS PEOPLE TRY TO PLAY ON THE CIRCUS

As the legal adjuster for one of the big shows, I have had some funny experiences. Most folks are honest, of course, but there are some who put their consciences in cold storage when the circus comes to town

By Frank A. Cook

Frank A. Cook was the legal adjuster or fixer on Barnum and Bailey and then Ringling-Barnum from 1909 until his death in January 1937. Born in Albany, New York in 1873, he spent a summer as a laborer on the John B. Doris Circus in the 1880s. After studying law for two years, he went to work for the Bradstreet Mercantile Agency, a predecessor of today's Dun and Bradstreet credit rating firm. He later was a claims adjuster for insurance companies. His last position before joining the circus was as an investigator for the Bureau of Corporations of the U. S. Department of Commerce and Labor.

His job on the circus entailed negotiating the numerous licenses and permits needed by Ringling-Barnum. He also handled the scores of personal injury cases that resulted from accidents patrons incurred, or claimed to have, while attending the circus. He spent part of each winter appearing in courts across the country litigating cases that couldn't be settled immediately. His widow recalled that every person whose clothes were ruined at the circus was wearing his or her most expensive attire. He was one of the best ever at his craft. He felt the most important attribute to successfully executing his duties was common sense. As the press agent Townsend Walsh wrote: "Diplomacy and tact were to Frank A. Cook the breath of life."

Cook was in charge of the immigration work by which foreign acts and attractions entered the country. One of his most notable importations was the Ubangis. He was the legal guardian of Franz Taibosh, better known as Clicko the Bushman, who spent the off-season as a member of the Cook family.

At the Depression's low point in 1932, Cook was paid \$6000, a princely sum for the time and equivalent to about \$95,000 today. In 1935 was he named manager of Hagenbeck-Wallace and Fore-

paugh-Sells, but was called back to the Ringling show just before the season began.

He was married three times. His first wife, with whom he had two children, died in 1918. In 1922 he married Lulu Davenport, sister of the great rider Orrin Davenport. They divorced in 1934. Soon after, he married Evelyn Joyce, sister of Jack Joyce, the animal trainer. They had one daughter.

Cook was universally respected within the circus community. On the occasion of his death Beverly Kelley of the Ringling-Barnum press department, noted that he was a "good friend and a dangerous enemy." Kelley concluded his tribute by writing: "It's hard losing you, Cookie, but when the long season ends for a lot of us it will be comfortable knowing that the king of fixers is there ahead of us. We'll probably need you pretty badly."



Frank A. Cook from *The American Magazine*, February 1923.

Frank Braden, another star of the press department, commented on Cook's dedication to his job, noting that shortly before he died the semi-delirious Cook described to his wife his vision of seeing the Big One on the lot, ready to give the matinee performance. "They're waiting for Cook," he told her. "They're ready to start the show and they're waiting for 'Cookie'—with the license."

This article, almost certainly ghost written, was published in the February 1923 issue of *The American Magazine*. Fred D. Pfening III

If you are looking for trouble, allow me to recommend my job. You won't have to strain your eyes! Trouble will come hunting for you. All you will have to do will be to let it find you.

For fourteen years, as legal adjuster for the circus, I have been a sort of wholesale and retail dealer in trouble. I entered the business by chance; but I have stayed in it by choice. For it's a great life—if you don't weaken.



The Ringling-Barnum Circus midway in 1924. Pfening Archives.

In 1908 while working with the Government Bureau of Corporations, I learned that an investigation of municipal affairs was to be undertaken; and as I thought I'd like to have a hand in it I tried to figure out how I could travel around the country, see a lot of cities and towns and at the same time have a paying job.

It occurred to me that a circus did about as much traveling as anything I knew of. So I wrote to Ringling Brothers, stated my qualifications, and asked them for a position. I got it! They made me their "legal adjuster." I didn't know then what a legal adjuster was, but I soon found out.

We had been showing in Philadelphia for several days when an irate female appeared before me, bareheaded and clutching a strange object in her hand. She explained indignantly that one of our giraffes had reached over his enclosure and nibbled her new spring hat right off her head! She had recovered the hat, which she dramatically submitted in evidence; and I had to admit that the giraffe certainly had made a mess of the lady's spring millinery. She claimed that the hat had cost fifteen dollars; but we finally compromised on seven.

I might add here a word of warning to other ladies: Keep your eye on the giraffes when you go near them, especially if you have something red on your hat. Giraffes will take a chance and browse on anything within reach. And they are particularly fond of red.

These claims for damages, however, are really the least of my troubles. In fact, I've had some I should hate to have missed, even if I'd had to pay the bills myself.

For instance, when we were showing in a certain Western town our cook tent was pitched close to a back yard in which a woman had hung out her washing. Late in the afternoon I was summoned to the lady's premises and found her in a great state of excitement.

She indignantly informed me that swarms of flies had been attracted to the neighborhood because of our cookhouse; that they had then descended in battalions upon her nice clean clothes; and that her own lingerie, her husband's

underwear, and the various other items of the wash had been liberally fly-specked.

Well, you never can do anything with an angry person by making him, or her, more angry, so I began by admiring the evidences of her talents as a laundress. I vowed that I never had seen such snow-white clothes.

"Why," I said, "there isn't a spot nor a speck on them."

"Isn't there!" she exclaimed. "Just come and look!"

Well, I came and I looked. And I could not deny that flies had worked overtime on that wash! You had to see it to believe it could be possible.

"Madam," I said, "you certainly do raise industrious flies in your town. But the injury isn't permanent. You're such a wonderful laundress that you can easily wash these clothes again and remove all traces of this unfortunate invasion."

"That's all you know about housework!" she exploded. "I'll show you."

And snatching a garment from the line she led the way to a tub near the house, applied soap liberally, scrubbed the garment good and hard, wrung it out, then triumphantly offered it for my examination. And, sure enough not a fly speck had vanished! She vowed they never would.

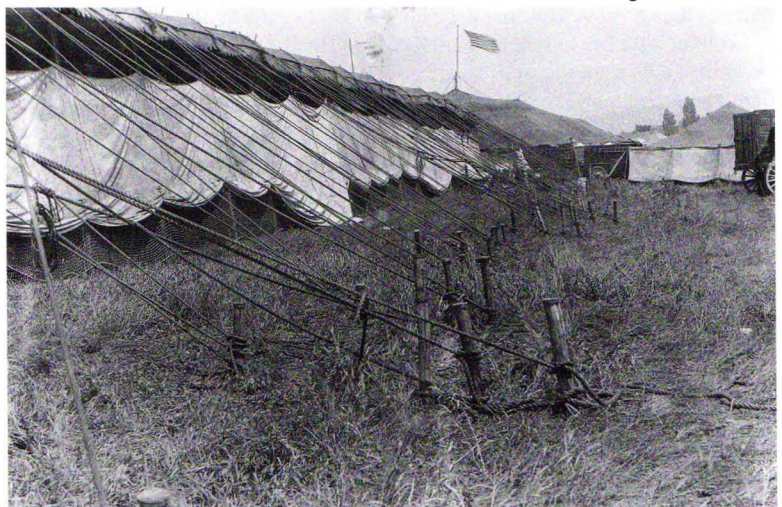
"But," I protested, these are undergarments. No one will ever see the fly specks."

"We will see them!" she declared; and I couldn't deny that.

When I asked her how much she wanted to console herself for having to wear flyspecked underclothes she fixed fifteen dollars as the price of her wounded pride. But I finally soothed her feelings with five dollars and three tickets for the evening performance.

I had an interesting case in St. Louis a few years ago. A young woman who claimed that she had torn her dress skirt on a tent stake exhibited a very small tear as the damage done. She said it was a new suit which she had "just had made at Barr's," that it had cost sixty-five dollars, and that it was "ruined."

Tent stakes, such as these tied to the Ringling-Barnum big top side poles in the 1920s, were often the cause of injuries to audience members and their clothes. Pfening Archives.



Being a diplomat, I began by admiring the suit. "It certainly is pretty," I said. "So becoming, too! And I can see that it's in the very latest style."

She agreed enthusiastically to all this.

"It's a plaited skirt," I said, "and as it is brand-new of course the color hasn't changed and it isn't soiled. You say you've just had it made; so all you need to do is to go to Barr's and get them to put in a new breadth in place of the one where the tear is."

Oh, no! She wanted the price of the whole suit. I pointed out that the coat was not injured and that the rest of the skirt was all right. Finally, after involving herself in so many contradictions that she realized she had practically convicted herself of attempting to cheat the circus management out of sixty-five dollars, she asked what I thought she ought to do.

"Well," I said, "if I were you, I'd go home, take a needle and thread, and show how nicely I could mend that little tear. Why, as clever a young lady as you are could fix it so that no one would ever notice it. And I will give you five dollars to pay you for the half-hour you will spend."

She took my advice—and the five dollars. But, a few days later, another young woman appeared before me with torn skirt. And this one was torn. It looked as she'd had a regular wrestling match with a tent stake. But I glanced at the young lady herself I was struck by the fact that she bore a striking resemblance to the girl of the earlier skirt episode.

"Did your sister get her dress mended all right?" I suddenly inquired.

"Oh, yes—" she began, then caught herself.

I looked her straight in the eye. "So that's the game, is it?" I said. "Your sister got five dollars for something she claimed the circus was responsible for; and you thought it was an easy way for you to get some money too. So you put on an old torn skirt and came here to collect damages on a trumped-up claim. Officer," I called to our detective, "arrest this woman for trying to obtain money under false pretenses."

At that she broke down and confessed that she had planned the trick just as I said.

Of course we did not arrest the girl; all I wanted was to teach her a lesson.

Another time, a woman declared that we had damaged a little cherry tree on her premises. I couldn't see the least sign of injury, except that a few leaves and twigs had been brushed off, but she insisted that it was seriously hurt and, furthermore, that she loved it so deeply that she was inconsolable. However, she estimated that thirty dollars would enable her to bear up under the tragic affliction.

I couldn't get her to reduce the figure, so I finally agreed to pay her thirty dollars for the tree. Then I called our men and told them to put a chain around the little sapling and get ready to pull it up. When she saw these preparations she demanded to know what I was going to do.

"Why, madam," I said, "I'm going to take the tree."

"But you can't do that."

"Certainly I can," I replied. "I've paid thirty dollars for it. That was your price. Do you expect me to pay for a thing and not have it?"

"But I want that tree!"

Of course she wanted it; the tree wasn't damaged at all. So she accepted a few dollars and kept the cherry tree. She simply had thought, as so many people do think, that she could put something over on the circus.

It is a curious phase of human nature that folks who would not dream of cheating an individual seem to have an entirely different standard of honesty when they deal with a company, or an orga-

nization; especially if it does not belong in their own community. And the circus in particular is picked out as a target for the most amazing sharp practices.

There was the town of C—, where we never showed without having to pay the city government a big bill for manhole covers which were broken by the heavy wagons in our haul from the railroad yards to the lot. They charged us over fifteen dollars for each cover; and we always broke at least half a dozen. It seemed curious, for it was the only town where we had this trouble. But I couldn't deny that the damage was done; so, for years, we paid the bills.

Then something happened. An ex-employee of the city government, who had a grudge against it, told me the secret of those broken covers. Every time the circus was to show in C—certain of the town officials removed the manhole covers along the route and substituted others from a heap of old ones which had been discarded years before. They charged us for these rotten old covers which we broke. Then, when the circus had left, they put back the ones they had temporarily removed.

We showed again in C—a few years ago. And before the day of our arrival I told one of the town officials that I knew the trick they had played on us.

"I can take you to the junk pile from which you get the old covers you want us to break," I said. "And I know just where you store the covers that are removed before we arrive. Now," I said, "if you want this thing aired in public—all right. But I think there will be no bill this year for broken manhole covers."

Needless to say, there wasn't.

Another circus feature which some towns made an excuse for graft was our steam calliope. That poor little steam boiler was gone over pretty nearly every day of its life by some inspector or other, and of course he always collected a fee. One town presented a large bill for damages which they said had been done to their street paving by hot coals dropping out of the calliope's firebox. I have good eyes, and I couldn't see the slightest evidence of injury; but the city fathers were men of remarkable vision. Other towns tried to collect fines from us on the ground that the calliope violated the smoke ordinance. Fortunately we have an electric [air] calliope now, so that particular source of trouble no longer exists.

Towns sometimes try to charge exorbitantly for the water we use. In one case they turned off the water in the middle of the afternoon and said we couldn't have any more unless we paid a big extra charge for it. They claimed that we had used thousands of gallons, and that the town was almost dry. I made them put in a meter and turn the water on again. The meter told the true story; and they admitted then that they had simply tried to put over a scheme to get more money out of us.

Late one night, after the show was over and everything, as I supposed, had been hauled to the trains, I was told that eleven of our drivers and our assistant superintendent had been arrested. I hurried to the police station, where I was informed that the arrests had been made because the drivers had taken their wagons over streets for which we had no permit.

The first thing we do in a town is to get various permits, including one to take our wagons to and from the lot over a certain specified route. This route is at night by torches, so that the drivers will be able to follow it exactly.

The night captain of police said the drivers had driven for two blocks on streets not included in the permit. I simply had to get the men down to the train, so I asked what he would accept to them go.

"One hundred dollars each," he declared.

Well, that took my breath away. It was an exorbitant sum and he knew it. But he also knew that he had us in a tight place. While we

were discussing the matter, in walked George Black, our officer, all dressed up and looking like a million dollars. I introduced him very impressively. Then I said to the night captain: "See here. Why do you hold those drivers? They're of no particular consequence; but here's Mr. Black. You can see for yourself that he is a person of importance. Why don't you let those no-account fellows go and hold Black instead?"

Naturally, when I said this, Black was mad as a hatter; and as the captain wanted to be as mean as he could, he jumped at the chance of making more trouble—as he thought. So he agreed to take Black in exchange and the other twelve men were sent off to the train! As soon as they had gone, I took out one hundred dollars, laid it down, and said cheerfully: "There you are, Captain. That's for the release of Mr. Black."

"What?" he roared.

"Why, you said you wanted one hundred dollars for each man held, didn't you?" I said. "Well, you're holding one man. There's your hundred."

I never saw a more dazed human being—nor a madder one, when he realized what he had done. And, by the way, I found out how the whole thing happened. After our torches had been placed at the street corners where the wagons were to turn, this night captain sent men to move the lanterns from one corner to another one, two blocks farther along. Our drivers were thus decoyed, going over blocks which were not on the specified route. The slick captain had expected to collect twelve hundred dollars for that little trick.

But the commonest form of graft is the ticket graft. Here is one funny case. Late one afternoon a peppery little woman was brought to me to tell her tale of woe.

"I want four tickets for the show tonight," was her opening shot.

"Yes, madam," I said. "The ticket wagon is right over there."

"Oh, I'm not going to buy them," she retorted. "I expect you to give me the tickets."

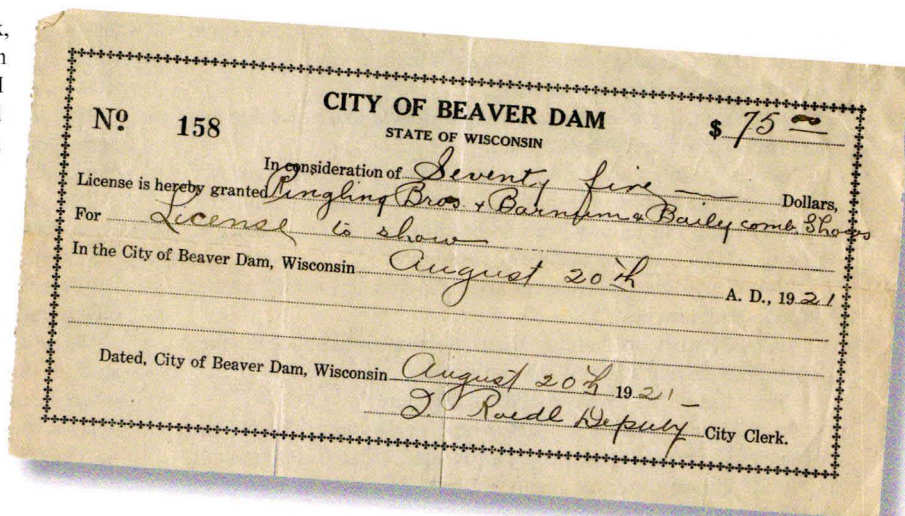
"Really," I said, "on what ground?"

"Well," she tossed her head, "people have been streaking my house all afternoon, going to this circus; and my dog was barking at them the whole time, so that he kept the baby awake and I lost my afternoon nap! The least you can do is to give me tickets for my family to come to the show tonight."

But compared with the way some people try to graft tickets, that woman was modest in her demands. As I said before, the first thing I do when we reach a town is to go to the city hall for our licenses and permits. And of course we always "fix up" the city officials with free tickets for the show. That's all right. We expect to do it. But it certainly is amazing what large families many of these city officials seem to have! I have come to the conclusion that an alderman with less than eleven children is almost a freak of nature.

I encountered one city clerk, however, who reached the high water mark in this line. When I went to him for our licenses he announced that he wanted three hundred tickets for himself. I asked him if he hadn't said "hundred" by mistake, and if "three" wasn't what he had really meant. But he came back strong with his "three hundred," and added that if he didn't get that many tickets the circus wouldn't get any license. I took out the money for the license, offered it to him, and he refused it.

"Very well," I said, "you have been offered the regular fee and you have refused to take it. Now we will show without a license, if necessary."



Virtually all towns, and many counties and states required a license for a circus to appear within its jurisdiction. The amount varied from city to city. This \$75 fee for Ringling-Barnum to appear at Beaver Dam, Wisconsin on August 20, 1921 was on the light side. Pfening Archives.

I went across the hall to see the chief of police, who was a good friend of mine and when I had told him the story he sent for the city clerk and asked him what he meant by holding us up for three hundred tickets.

"Chief," said the clerk, "it's this way: I've been promising my friends that when the circus came to town I'd see that they got tickets. Election is coming on pretty soon, and if I don't keep my promise those people won't vote for me and they'll do everything they can to defeat me. I've just got to have those tickets."

I couldn't see that it was up to the circus to contribute quite so largely to his campaign expenses, so he had to cut down his figure.

I ran across another policeman once who said he wanted one hundred and fifty tickets. But he explained he was willing to pay for them; all he wanted was to have them look like complimentaries. He said his constituents would be more impressed by getting what seemed to be free passes than they would if they thought he bought the tickets. That was probably true, too. It seems a universal trait of human nature to like to flourish free tickets before less fortunate friends.

One day I was puzzled by the news that all our "balloon boys"—those who sell pennants and balloons—had been arrested. I couldn't understand so I hurried to the police station to investigate. The sheriff who was in charge, greeted me cordially.

"I hear you've got a bunch of our boys down here," I said. "What have they done?"

"Nothing," he replied genially. "That's the trouble. Nobody's done anything. Not for me. None of your fellows have showed up here with tickets for me, so I determined to make somebody come down here. I couldn't think of anything that would bring you quicker than to arrest some of your people. So I did it—and here you are."

Many a time I find myself in a situation where only quick thinking will save me a peck of trouble. For instance, I was out on the lot one when I saw two strangers having an argument with one of our employees. He was a man who never gave any trouble so I couldn't understand what was up. I went over to the group and found that the two strangers were local detectives and were threatening to arrest our man on a trumped-up charge. That was a time that called for

quick thinking. Turning to our man, I said angrily: "Haven't I told you that I won't stand for any more trouble from you? This settles it. I'm through with you. Get out!"

The chap stared me in amazement. He looked like a nice dog that had been kicked by his best friend.

"Go on," I said. "You're fired. Get your stuff and take it away."

Going close to him and shaking my fist in his face, I muttered, "It's all right, old fellow, I'm just bluffing. Slide out, while I'm talking." Then I turned back to the strangers.

"I've warned that fellow over and over again," I said; "but I'm through with him now."

And so I went on, holding their attention until suddenly they looked around and said, "Why—he's gone."

"Yes," I said, "he won't trouble us any more."

Another time, when a grouchy patron of the circus complained of one of our men who, I was perfectly sure, was not at all at fault, I "fired" him in the same manner. I actually made him leave on a regular passenger train, but tipped him off to wait for us at our next stop.

Just as I expected, the man who had made the complaint backed down and begged me to reconsider the dismissal. Later, he hunted me up again and said that if I wouldn't reinstate the discharged employee he himself would get a job for him. It simply proved what I had known all the time, his complaint had been without just cause. But it would have been impossible to get him to admit this if I attempted to argue with him.

Charles Thompson, veteran "adjuster," was with the Sells show once when someone complained to him of a man whom they indignantly pointed out. The man complained of happened to be Sells himself. But Thompson did not mention this fact to the disgruntled stranger. Instead, he apparently flew into a rage, walked up to Sells—his employer and the boss of the whole show—and told him he was fired! The stranger protested he didn't want the man discharged; so Thompson, with apparent reluctance, consented to reinstate him. No one appreciated the joke better than Sells himself. The stranger never knew it was a joke.

One of the favorite ways of trying to hold the circus up is to bring in some claim just as we are leaving. One night several of the sheriff's deputies appeared just as we were beginning to send

In 1928 Cook had his friend Karl K. Knecht, the editorial cartoonist of the *Evansville* (Indiana) *Courier*, create his Christmas card. Pfening Archives.

the wagons to the train and said they had an attachment to serve. I examined their papers, then I said: "Well, I suppose you want to attach something valuable. How about one of the elephants?"

That idea appealed to them, so we arranged it. When it was all agreed on, I said, "You'll have to leave a man in charge of the elephant."

They were rather taken aback by this; but told one of their number to stay, and the rest went off. When they had left, I had one of the elephants brought out fastened to a stake.

"There's your elephant," I said. "I hope you won't have any serious trouble with him." And I walked off and left them together.

We proceeded with our work, loading the wagons and getting the stuff off the lot. Every little while, the deputy would call me over to where he was standing guard over his elephant and wanted to know what he was going to do.

"Don't bother me about it," I said. "I'm busy. He's in your charge now."

Finally he called me again and demanded if I was going to leave him there alone with an elephant on his hands.

"Certainly," I said. "But I want to remind you of one thing: He is still the property of this circus. If anything happens to that elephant, or if he does any damage while he is in your charge, you will be held responsible for it."

"But I don't want to be responsible for it," he protested.

"You are, whether you want to or not," I retorted. "And I advise you to be pretty careful; because if an elephant gets excited and goes on a rampage he will muss up a lot of property. So be careful how treat him."

The man looked at the elephant looming up in the darkness and weaving back and forth as elephants do.

"He seems pretty nervous to me," I said. "He probably doesn't like you because you're a stranger. You'd better be careful." And I turned to go.

"Say. Wait a minute," the deputy begged. "Don't leave me with that elephant! Take him away."

"But how about the attachment?" I asked.

"Never mind the attachment," he said, "I'll take the responsibility of explaining to the sheriff; but I'm darned if I'll take the responsibility of playing nurse-girl to an elephant."

So that was the way I got out of that trouble. Another time we were just leaving the lot when they told me that a chariot and four horses were missing. They simply had vanished after the chariot races at the close of the evening performance.

Well, I hunted and hunted, but I couldn't find hide nor hoof of them. Finally, I came across one of the townspeople who said he had seen a chariot and four horses, apparently in full flight down a certain street. I thought perhaps they had run away; so I got on a horse and started after them.

I did a regular Paul Revere ride through the night, asking everyone I met whether they had seen a stray chariot anywhere. I finally traced the outfit to a stable on the outskirts of the town. The sheriff himself had climbed into the chariot as it stood outside the main tent, and had driven off without being observed. He said he had attached it, on some claim or other, and seemed very proud of his exploit. But when I told him he would have to feed the horses and deliver them and the vehicle in perfect condi-



tion wherever we wanted them sent, he climbed in again and drove back to the lot.

Another time—it was Fourth of July—one of our boys, named Hathaway, was walking down to the train with some of the other young folks after the night show. The girls were in front; and Hathaway, who is a jolly young chap, would occasionally throw a torpedo on the sidewalk back of them. They would jump and squeal, as girls do, just for the fun of it.

The whole thing was mere play. But the small-town policeman knew that they were circus people; so, in spite of the girls' protests, he arrested Hathaway for disorderly conduct. I was sent for, and went to the police station where I tried to explain that it had been harmless fooling. But the policeman stuck to his charge. Hathaway, I was informed, would have to stay in the lock-up until morning, when he would appear before the mayor, who was also justice of the peace.

Perhaps you don't know what that means, but I did. When a prisoner is tried before a justice of the peace it is almost a foregone conclusion that he will be found guilty. The reason is that if he is convicted the magistrate collects the fine. Out of three hundred and fifty cases tried in a magistrate's court in Philadelphia, just one case went in favor of the defendant. As that is a fair sample of what generally happens, I was pretty sure Hathaway would be found "guilty."

The only thing I could do was to try to get the business over as soon as possible, so that we could rejoin the show. I called up the mayor by telephone and tried to show him that the charge was groundless, but he insisted the case must be tried. To make a long story short, I finally succeeded in persuading him to let the prisoner appear before him at his house. We drove out there, he "held court" in his parlor and fined Hathaway twenty-seven dollars and a half. The funny thing was that he consented to remit the fine. His dignity had been appeased. But it was two o'clock in the morning before we got away.

You would be amazed, I think, if you knew the absolute unreasonable claims for damages that are brought against the circus. In one case, a man claimed that one of our tent stakes "encroached" on his property. The city engineer was called to examine the situation, and announced that the stake was one inch over the line. Whereupon the property owner got out an attachment in the sum of five hundred dollars against the circus.

During the influenza epidemic a few years ago, one of our workmen died on the first section of our train. They wired me—I was on the fourth section—and I telegraphed to have the body taken off at a certain town and sent to the undertaker's. When my section reached the town I got to attend to the matter. I hunted up the authorities asked that the body be shipped to the man's friends. I gave them the address where I could be reached, and told them to let me know what the expense proved to be and I would send them the money.

"Not on your life!" they said. "You'll pay now."

"Very well," I replied. "How much will it be?"

"One thousand dollars!" they declared.

"But how much is the undertaker's fee?" I asked.

"Two hundred dollars."

"What is the other eight hundred for?"

"Never mind what it's for. You'll pay it, or your train doesn't leave this town."

I stepped aside as if to discuss the matter with the circus men who were with me, and quietly told them to go back to the station and get our train on its way as quick as they could. Then I returned to my discussion. A little later one of my men came back and called me aside.

"We can't move the train," he said. "They've chained the wheels to the track."

Well, I paid the thousand dollars, and we left the town. We got back a good share of the money they tried to rob us of; but we were a long time doing it.

I could go on indefinitely, telling how people make trouble for me; I could tell of the man with a broken arm, who with the connivance of a dishonest lawyer claimed that the arm had been broken by his falling off the circus seats. I found that his arm had been broken before the circus came to town.

I could tell how all our balloon boys were arrested one morning by a greedy chief of police. Going to the police station I had them brought in; and as we conferred together I told them to slip me every cent they had in their pockets. Then I turned them over to the chief.

"They are not on the circus pay roll," I said. "You'll have to collect from them. They're not under my charge."

When he tried to collect the fines he imposed, of course they hadn't a penny among them.

"Too bad, Chief," I said. "You made one mistake: You arrested them too soon. They hadn't a chance to sell their balloons and get the money."

You understand this arrest been absolutely inexcusable. It was a plain case of extortion. I don't want to give the impression that we would attempt to evade justice. The trouble is that people seem to think the circus is legitimate prey for graft. Sometimes the graft is like that attempted by this particular chief of

police. Sometimes it is harmless and amusing.

For instance, I was approached late one afternoon by a bevy of very charming ladies with a request for something like twenty tickets for the evening performance. Of course I politely asked just why we were expected to have them as our guests, and they informed me that they belonged to a Ladies' Auxiliary, and had been working all day in a booth, where they sold coffee and sandwiches to the people who came to town for the circus. They seemed to consider that their little money-making enterprise had in some mysterious way put us under about twenty tickets' worth of obligation to them.

And so it goes. We of the circus try to be fair and generous. For example, we often invite the children in the orphan asylums to come to the show as our guests. But we have learned to ask, not only how many orphans we are to expect, but also how many grown-ups will be in charge of them. It is an actual fact that on one occasion we had forty-five orphans accompanied by forty-seven attendants. I think anyone will admit that those orphans were well chaperoned. **BW**



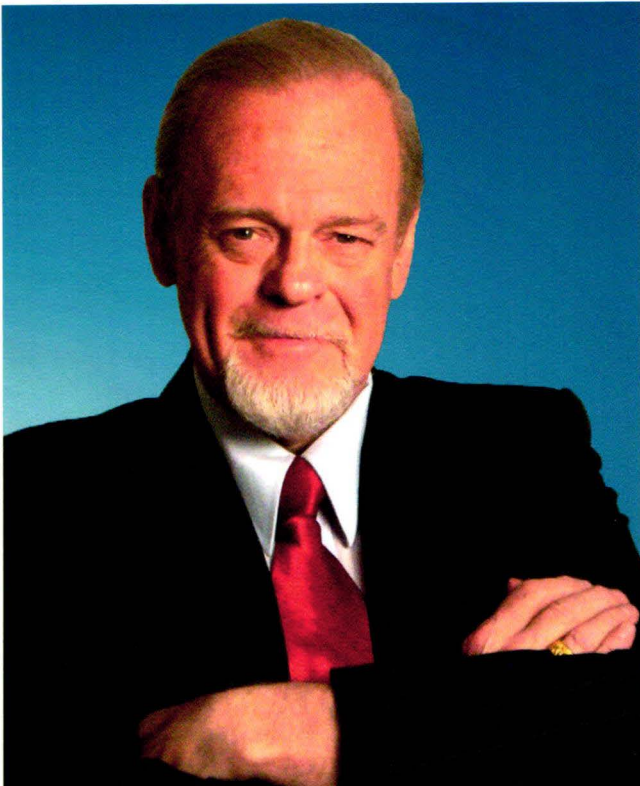
Clicko (or as spelled here Clico), the wild dancing African Bushman, was Cook's ward, living with him and his family. Clicko is buried with Cook's daughter and her husband in Hudson, New York. This image was Clicko's pitch card, sold in the sideshow. Pfening Archives.

TALES FROM THE PHONE ROOMS

By Mike Straka

Presidential Candidate Books A Date for Me

Before the start of our 1980 touring season, I was dispatched to Boston. Bill English was hoping I could secure bookings for a week of our tour of Snow White and Her Seven Magical Dwarfs. He had chosen the Boston area because he had an established phone promoter up there. The promoter was Mr. McTavish and he ran a permanent phone room in Boston and the surrounding areas.



Paul Royter, the great Canadian phone room operator and magician. Paul Royter photo.

I settled into a hotel in Newton, Massachusetts during the first weeks of January. I started calling service organizations, Jaycees, Lions Clubs and Kiwanis. They represented my "A" list. The police and fire deals were sewed up tight and I had no hope of booking them.

By the end of two weeks, I had contracted six sponsors. I had one more to close to finish out our Boston week. I focused my efforts on Lowell, Massachusetts at Bill's direction. I set up several meetings, but had not made any progress. I believe it was the Lions club that invited me to their breakfast meeting to make my presentation.

My approach with service clubs was threefold. First, I would outline the nature of the show--part magic, part circus, part play and totally fun for the kids. I would highlight that we cast the show with the finest New York actors and the very best circus acts. I had a nice board with photos of previous productions.

They could see the sets, costumes and all the glitter. To break the ice, I would get the club president up and do a quick magic bit. This part of the pitch would take four minutes. I had figured out that the clubs would give you no more than fifteen minutes. Most of the time you were lucky to get ten minutes.

The second part was pitching "the deal." For this I again relied on a large presentation board which I placed on a tripod. It outlined and broke down the ticket sales.

Sponsor sold tickets: 50%

Phone sold tickets: 40% to sales manager, 40% to show, 20% to Sponsor

Tickets sold at the door: 50% to Sponsor

Example: 2000 tickets sold @ \$5 = \$10,000 Sponsor share = \$2,000

200 tickets sold by Sponsor = \$1,000 Sponsor share = \$500

200 tickets sold at the door = \$1,000 Sponsor share = \$500

Total Due Sponsor: \$3000

The board was a nice marketing piece, it focused the eye on the last part. Really, that's all the clubs were interested in. Of course, no club sold any tickets themselves. Ticket sales on the night of the performance was rare. That's why I would play up the fact that the sales manager would do all the work.

The last part was "the closing." I would tell the members that I was only in the area for a short time and would appreciate an up or down vote on this.

If the members had any questions, I would answer them with my stock responses. "Why does the show and promoter make more money than we do?" This question came up a lot.

Answer: "Well, the promoter has to pay four to five sales people to conduct the sale. He also has the cost of maintaining the office and phones. The show has eight cast members and the cost of moving from city to city. If you get the performance space donated, you will be making 20%-50% clear on each ticket sold."

On this particular meeting, I could have left all my presentational material at the hotel.

Before the meeting, I had met with key members of the club and outlined the program. I sensed that I had their interest and support. When the time came, I was introduced. I stepped up to the podium with my boards and a friendly smile. Show time. At that moment, one of the club members came into the room and yelled that John Anderson, the presidential candidate, was here and would be happy to say a few words.

Before you could say, Third Party Candidate, John Anderson replaced me at the podium. Of course, if you give a politician a podium, an audience and a few minutes, you're going to get an "Elect Me Speech." Mr. Anderson did not disappoint. He quickly filled my time and hurried on to his next stump speech.

The meeting was ending with everyone preparing to leave. The club president suddenly realized that I was still standing up there. He yelled out, "This guy wants to bring his play to Lowell and wants us to sponsor it. All in favor." The room echoed yea. "Opposed?" The room was quiet. "Motion carried." said the president.

The date was booked, thanks to a timely interruption.

It Takes a Thief

This story centers on the exploits of big Bob Howard, a phone promoter. He worked for our show and, many other producers. For many years, Bob promoted Nacogdoches, Texas. The town is located southeast of Dallas, near the Louisiana border. The town's nickname is the "Oldest Town in Texas." The population in the 1970s was under 20,000. So it was a small town. I don't remember the civic club that sponsored our show, but I do remember that I dealt with the same committee each year.

When I arrived in town, I meet with the committee at the local café. They handed me the settlement sheet with a gross sales of \$20,000. Given the size of the town and the local economy, this was a fantastic sale. I even joked to the members, "What did Bob do, rob the bank." Instead of smiles, the committee had solemn faces.

The committee chairman said that they were happy with the ticket sales, but they noticed that Bob had not turned in any cash. They knew several businesses that had paid in cash. This cash had not showed up on the weekly settlement sheets.

I patched things over and suggested that perhaps Bob had kept the cash and had put one of his own checks in to cover it. This was the best I could come up with on short notice. I also said that we could get them another promoter next year. This suggestion is what took place.

When I arrived at Nacogdoches the following year, I once again made my way down to the town café. The same group greeted me and we made our settlement. The gross sales that year were only \$6,000. I did note that the new promoter had turned in and listed a few hundred dollars in cash. The sponsoring group only made \$1,200 on this promotion. The year before the group had made \$4,000.

I could sense that all was not well. After we finished up, the committee chairman leaned over to me and said, "We want the thief back." I nodded and said that I'm sure that could be arranged.

As a postscript to this story, the next year Bob Howard increased the gross and even reported a hundred dollars collected in cash. We continued to play this town for many years. Sometimes it just takes a thief to get the job done.

An Interview with Paul Royter

Paul Royter is a Canadian, but we never held that against him. He's also an accomplished magician and hypnotist. That was harder to overlook. Up to 2009, he also had one of the larger phone operations in Canada. It surprised me that phone rooms were still working in Canada. On a recent phone interview, Paul shared a few "whoppers" with me.

It is usually my policy to include third person names in all stories, but Paul was a little uncomfortable with this. All of the promoters are still living and he still has business dealings with them. So as a compromise, I will relate the stories using a time-honored tradition, quoting highly placed unnamed sources.

Straka: "So phones are still working in Canada?"

Royter: "Oh yes, we're about 10 years behind the U.S. You can still phone, but it's much harder. This past year, I did my first tour without phones. It went very well. I think the days of phone rooms are well past."

Straka: "Like me, you started in the business with Bill English. What was his best advice?"

Royter: "He told me that I should plan on losing 10% off the top. Every promoter takes that much. If it went past 25%, find another guy to work the room. Good advice and it proved to be true."

Straka: "You started in the 1970's?"

Royter: "Yes, early 70's."

Straka: "You must have a few tall tales, can you share a few?"

Royter: "I had a great booking agent, let's call him 'Bob.' He would call up and tell me he booked Missoula, Montana. Our deal would be \$200 for each signed date. I would wire him the \$200 and wait for the signed contract. A couple of weeks would go by and I would get a contract for Billings, Montana, not Missoula. I never thought too much about it but it happened almost all the time.

"He also booked for several circuses and other variety shows. It seems he would call up all the shows and tell them that he had booked them for a particular city. In fact, he hadn't booked anything. He just needed the money. He was a heavy drinker, no shock or surprise here.

"When he sobered up, he was able to book dates. Of course, you got a different city than you paid for. He could book two or three sponsors in one day. I've seen him drive into a town and stop at the local fire hall. Within ten minutes, he would have the fire chief talked into doing the program. Of course, the chief would say, 'we'll bring this up at the next meeting with the board members.' Bob would say 'Let's call a few board members now and get a sense of their interest.' He would tell the chief that he had other clubs interested in booking the show. If they had five board members, he only needed to close three of them.

I had an interesting situation involving one of my competitors. I had booked the Kinsmen Club for my evening magic show. The Kinsmen are like your Kiwanis clubs. This group had their own clubhouse or meeting place. My phone room was working out of a different location.

"My competitor, let's call him 'Pete Canyon,' came into town and asked if he could rent the clubhouse for a production he was bringing to town. The Kinsmen didn't see a conflict and could make a nice rental for the month. Pete started his phone campaign and instructed his phonemen to start the pitch in this way. 'Hi, this is Bill calling from the Kinsmen club, we're bringing a big magic show to your town.' The merchants thought this was the big show that the Kinsmen sponsor with me each year. We lost half our gross sales that year.

"Speaking of competitors, I worked Rock Springs, Wyoming one year. I had a good sponsor and a good gross. The last week of the campaign, the entire town was papered by another magician. Let's call him 'The Amazing K.' It was the funniest thing, half of his paper said, 'Wait For The Big One!' Just like the old circus days. What's really funny is that he didn't want people to wait to go to his show. He wanted the merchants to wait for his phonemen to call and pitch.

"I knew a promoter in Calgary, Alberta who made a living through athletic clubs in schools. He would sell them on sponsoring the show and then use them as the phonemen. He would come in and give them a crash course on phone sales. He would teach them the art of pitching, closing and meeting objections. He would provide a script and let them loose. Of course, this was a night room operation. The kids turned in great grosses and they never got drunk and never skimmed the gross.

"We have our share of 'bad eggs' up here. I won't mention his name, but this guy worked this scheme for many years. He would get a club to sponsor the show and always schedule the performance six to eight months in advance. His contract worked like this. The cost of the show would come off the top, then the sponsor and him would split 50/50.

"By the time the show date rolled around, Most of the club members had forgotten they had sponsored the show. In fact, anyone who had bought tickets six months ago had forgotten about the show.

"If anyone showed up at the auditorium, he would refund their money. He had to do this because he NEVER booked a show! He would take the cost of the show off the top and split the balance with the sponsor. I don't think anyone ever caught on." **BW**

THE 2011 CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY CONVENTION

by John Polacsek

From June 8-11 seventy members of the Circus Historical Society convened at the Drawbridge Inn in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, just a few miles south of Cincinnati. Attendees had the opportunity to network, share jackpots, and learn about circus history. Some came in early to visit the Cincinnati Zoo or the Enquirer Printing Company in Newtown, Ohio.

On Wednesday June 8, registration began while multiple sheet posters from the Ted Bowman Collection were spread on the floor of the room. A number of two-, four-, and eight-sheet leaping tiger posters from Enquirer Printing were laid out, along with a few newer pieces from Enquirer that typify the company's current circus work. A 1932 sixteen sheet Hagenbeck-Wallace cat act lithograph was one of the highlights of this display.

George McIlveen, a local circus model builder, stopped by to help with registration. He gave people suggestions where they could go for dinner and other attractions in the Cincinnati area. Registrants also had the opportunity to hear Ward Hall hold court, telling his always-interesting stories. Al Stencell kept the jackpots going and a good time was had by all.

The next day the group was up bright and early to get around the morning traffic and excessive roadwork to get to the Cincinnati Art Museum by 9:00 am to view *The Amazing American Circus Poster Exhibit*. A special tour had been arranged by the curators, Kristin Spangenberg and Deborah Walk. The group had two hours to see the exhibit before the museum opened to the public. It was great to hear the comments regarding the various Strobridge lithographs as the members wandered throughout the exhibition. A number of videos related to circus billposting augmented the art.

The only down side was that no photographs or video taping was allowed in the exhibit. Photography was allowed only in the front entrance. Many members took advantage of a special discount on the exhibit catalogue in the gift shop. This weighty tome, *The Amazing American Circus Poster-The Strobridge Lithographing Company*,

Janice Aria of the Ringling-Barnum included excellent photos of the posters and some great essays by circus and printing experts.

A lunch in the museum followed, after which part of the group headed to Evergreen Cemetery in nearby Southgate, Kentucky where we gathered at a Civil War artillery battery fortification. From this high point we overlooked the countryside and directed a few drivers to the location via cell phone. Just across the road was the monument to

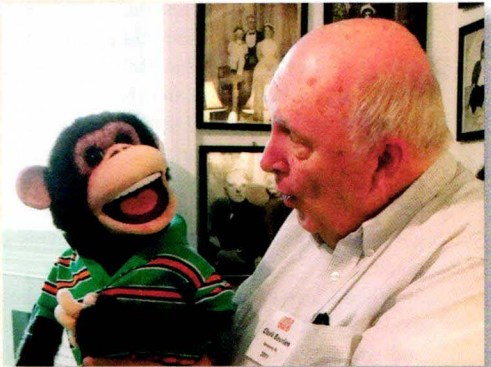
the Donaldson family and the gravesite of William H. Donaldson, one of the founders of *Billboard*. The group stood in the shade while a few appropriate words were read before he was toasted with bottled water. Ward Hall and Charlie Bellati, the two elder statesmen of the group, held a 1910 copy of *Billboard* as we marked the occasion giving thanks to one of the men who allowed so many of us to use his publication for historical research.

The day was hot and the occupants of our vehicle decided that a schooner of beer was not proper, so we decided to check out the local ice cream parlor while seeing a bit of Southgate, Kentucky. Proceeding onto the bypass we ended up just one exit away from the Drawbridge Inn. Soon we found ourselves in the residential neighborhood in which the Vent Haven Museum is located. This special collection is dedicated to the collecting and interpretation of those who performed with dummies. In three buildings there was an amazing display of art that had been hand carved for use by ventriloquists. The collection is well preserved and the docents enthralled the group with great stories. One of the highlights was Ward Hall putting on a special show for the group with one of the characters. The routine was actually a bit risqué, but was a polished presentation. One person noted, "I did not see his lips move."

The Vent Haven Museum holds an annual get together each July that draws ventriloquists from around the country. At that time the participants get a chance to walk through the buildings, but our group had the opportunity of being informed about the history and heritage of the collection, as well as being entertained.

The next morning the sessions began at the Drawbridge Inn with Kristin Spangenberg and Deborah Walk giving a detailed history of how the Strobridge poster exhibit was put together. A number of the consultants who helped develop the exhibit, or wrote sections of the exhibit catalogue were in the room. This was followed by a talk by Stuart Shepard who worked for the Strobridge Company. His father also worked for Strobridge and was responsible for the famous leopard face poster done for Ringling-Barnum in 1954. The previous evening a six sheet poster of this cat had been shown and it was brought out again so that Shepard could discuss the areas that he helped create.

Mark Patsfall followed. He had the group gather round as he prepared a lithograph stone. He demonstrated how the stone was used and anyone who signed the stone could receive a special printed lithograph from the convention. A number of the members initialed



Clark Beurlen literally tries his hand at working one of the dummies at the Vent Haven Museum, a wonderful facility dedicated to the preservation of ventriloquists' characters. The tour was one of the highlights of the convention. John Polacsek photo.



Janice Aria of the Ringling-Barnum Center for Elephant Conservation was the banquet speaker, giving a fascinating account of her career in the circus business and of the elephant breeding program conducted by Ringling-Barnum. She is shown here with CHS Secretary-Treasurer Bob Cline. John Polacsek photo.



Ward Hall (l.) and Charlie Bellati hold an old copy of *Billboard* in front of the grave of William H. Donaldson, one of the magazine's founders, in Southgate, Kentucky. Bob Cline photo.

the stone or drew artwork, while others tried to write backward on the stone as it would come out the reverse on the final printed poster.

Lane Talburt presented a video taped interview that he conducted with the late Fred D. Pfening, Jr., *Bandwagon* editor for almost fifty years, during the CHS convention in Las Vegas in 2007. John Polacsek remarked about the passing of CHS Trustee John H. McConnell. A toast to both of them was made with lemonade during the lunch that followed.

The afternoon sessions featured Rodney Huey sharing about "The Preservation Project for the Federation Mondiale du Cirque." David Carylton had an interesting presentation about how the circus transformed from being entertainment primarily for adults to one for children. Lively discussion continued after the talk and the well informed listeners commented on how audiences have changed for circuses and menageries over the years.

Bob Unterreiner discussed "Circus Band Music—The Backbone of American Circuses." Deborah Walk presented "The Ringling Museum's Phase II Expansion," which included not only preliminary sketches on the new addition, but some of the work in progress. The expansion will open in the near future. The Ringling Museum will also present the exhibition of Strobridge circus posters the CHS members saw at the Cincinnati Art Museum the day before. Matthew Wittman's "The Circus and New York City: A Short Guide to Local Collections" gave a detailed look into some of the hidden treasures located in the Big Apple. Matthew is working on an upcoming exhibition about the history of the circus in New York City, and we hope to hear more about it at next year's convention.

The annual auction followed in the evening. Choice items from Pfening Archives highlighted the event. With circus, sideshow and carnival expert Al Stencell as the auctioneer, assisted by John Polacsek, Kristin Spangenberg and Leslie Wagner, the auction hit full stride after about an hour. It was then that spirited bidding on a great selection of window cards, Strobridge posters, and a large selection of 101 Ranch, Adam Forepaugh, Barnum & Bailey, Ringling Brothers, and other early programs occurred. The quality of the material at this auction was excellent and the money raised will help defray the cost of *Bandwagon*.

The next morning saw a panel discussion on circuses and zoos moderated by Ken Kawata, and featuring Richard Reynolds, Robert Cline and Janice Aria. Afterward the room was darkened and Chris

Berry asked the group to imagine that it was during World War II and they were at the circus. With the aid of a 1943 Fitch Bandwagon broadcast from Madison Square Garden, the circus was brought to life and this old recording gave a new twist to preserving the sounds of the circus. The broadcast was from the NBC Red Network, Sunday, April 18, 1943 at 7:30 pm Eastern War Time. Ringling-Barnum luminaries Merle Evans, F. Beverly Kelly, and Fred Bradna were interviewed as part of the show.

Fred Dahlinger polled a number of the audience before the convention to get their thoughts on "The Concept of the Golden Age of Circuses." A lively discussion ensued regarding the Golden Age, and brought forth the question: Has there been more than one "Golden Age" in circus history?

The afternoon sessions started with Lane Talburt's interview that recorded "Pete Cristiani's Most Extraordinary Year on the Dailey Bros. Circus." Chris Berry's highly illustrated talk, "The Donaldson Lithograph Company of Cincinnati and Newport," was a look at the specialty and stock posters were produced by the firm. There was also a tie to *Billboard* magazine for William H. Donaldson was one of the publication's founders. John Polacsek presented "Magic under the Black Tent of the Barnum & Bailey Circus," about the illusions that Professors Hoffman and Roltair produced for James A. Bailey.

The annual banquet had former Secretary-Treasurer and long-time member David Price sitting at the head table along with President Judy Griffin, Vice-President John Polacsek, Secretary-Treasurer Bob Cline, and guest speaker Janice Aria. Price was one of the two emeritus trustees at the meeting, the other being Robert Sabia. The blessing of the meal was given by Father Richard Notter who also noted that a mass would be said in his room the next morning at 9:00 am.

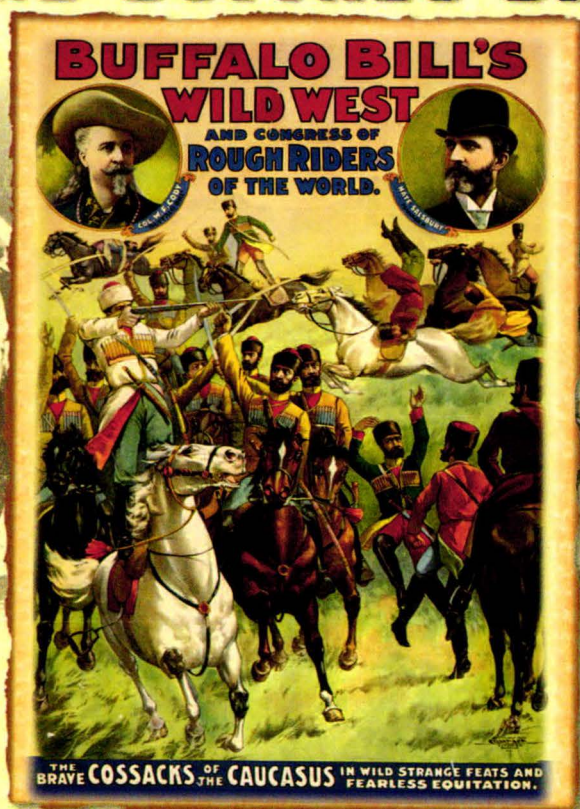
The annual banquet speaker was Janice Aria, Director, Animal Stewardship, at the Ringling Bros. Center for Elephant Conservation. She discussed her background and how she came to join the Greatest Show on Earth. It was her experiences as a clown, elephant rider and presenter that allowed her to find a rewarding career in circus. Bringing things up to date she explained the current elephant management program. She presented a viewpoint of the elephants that most people do not see, discussing topics such as health issues or finding a companion for a single elephant in a zoo. When it was all out and over the group was anxious to meet again next year in Baraboo, Wisconsin. **BW**



Many rare pieces of circus ephemera went on the block at the annual auction. Here Neil Cockerline poses with a Ringling Bros. Strobridge lithograph he has just won. The auction was the most financially successful one in years. Bob Cline photo.

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